

# FAITH VERSUS MATERIALISM

The Message of Sūrat al-Kahf

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SAYED ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

**FAITH**

*VERSUS*

**MATERIALISM**

(The Message of *Surat-ul-Kahf*)

By

**S. ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI**

English Translation by :  
**MOHIUDDIN AHMAD**

**Academy of  
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## INTRODUCTION

This book was originally written in Arabic and published under the title *As Asr'abain al-Imān wal-Māddiyah* by Dārul Qalam, Kuwait in 1971 (1390 A.H.) It was later rendered into Urdu, Like my other Arabic works, by my nephew Muhammad al-Hasani, editor of the Arabic Journal *Al-Ba'ath al-Islāmī*, which is published from Lucknow. It has now been translated into English by Mohiuddin Ahmad.

How this book came to be written, what is the nature of exegesis of the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* propounded here, from whom have I drawn inspiration in arriving at the conclusions drawn by me, how these are relevant to the challenging issues of the modern times and what guidance can be had from the *Sūrah* to solve these problems—answers to all these questions will be found in the following pages. I hope that the book would be found helpful in gaining an insight into the over-all view and the general pattern of the Quranic message.

ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI

July 2, 1972

DAIRA SHAH ALAM ULIAH  
RAEBARELI



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I write these lines not to flatter myself to introduce this book but to acknowledge my deep gratitude to the author for asking me to render this profound exposition of the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* into English. I have read Urdu version more than once with enlightenment to myself. I thought it desirable that this masterly exegesis of the *Sūrah* which has been widely acclaimed by those who have read it in Arabic and Urdu should be made available in English as well for the benefit of those who want to understand the message of the Qur'ān, in general, and *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, in particular. The English rendering has also gone through by the author. Still, if further elucidation is required anywhere for conveying his ideas more accurately, the fault would undoubtedly be mine.

I am also indebted to my friend Mr. Abrar Ahmad Khan who went through the manuscript, like my earlier translations, and helped me in improving and preparing it for the press.

MOHIUDDIN AHMAD

May 3, 1973

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## I

**PROLOGUE****My Acquaintance with *Sūrat-ul-Kahf***

One of the *Sūrahs* or the chapters of the Qur'ān which I am accustomed to recite on Fridays, since my childhood, is *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*<sup>1</sup> (The Cave). In the course of my study of the Traditions, I learnt that the Prophet exhorted his followers to learn and recite this chapter as a means of deliverance from the scourge of Dajjāl. This led me to think of the ways and means hinted at in this Chapter<sup>2</sup>, which could be efficacious in achieving deliverance from that despicable 'man of sin', for, the Prophet of Islam not only repeatedly beseeched divine protection against him but also vigorously commanded his followers to earnestly seek refuge from that evil. The Prophet described Dajjāl as 'the greatest evil since the birth of Adam to the Doomsday'.<sup>3</sup> This naturally aroused my curiosity to

- 
1. I acquired this habit owing to the insistence of my mother who always instructed me to recite the *Sūrah* on each Friday, and, from time to time, she ensured that I was following her instructions. I thus committed the whole of it to my memory. My mother, who could recite the entire Qur'ān from memory, died in Jamādī-ul-Ula, 1388 A.H.
  2. It has been related on the authority of Abū Sa'eed Khudri that whoever recites *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* in the way it was revealed, would be out of reach of Dajjāl. (*Mustadrak lil-Hākim*). Another tradition related on the authority of 'Alī, quotes the Prophet of Islam as saying : "Whoever recites *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* on a Friday shall be protected from the evil of Dajjāl for eight days, and if the latter appears during this period, he shall be saved from the curse of Dajjāl". Other Traditions promise protection from Dajjāl for those who recite the first or the last ten verses of this chapter.
  3. *Sahih Muslim*. On the authority of 'Amrān ibn Hasin.

find out why, of all the chapters of the Qur'ān, the Prophet selected this *Sūrah* for protection against this ominous evil.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Portending Calamity and *Sūrat-ul-Kahf***

I felt an irresistible urge to find out the reason for the selection of this chapter as a deliverer from the calamity of gathering clouds : I wanted to know what the *Sūrah* had to do with the portending evil of Dajjāl?

The Qur'ān has a number of chapters of varying length but why was this *Sūrah* selected at all as a recipe to dwell in safety

1. The Old Testament gives evidence of a general Jewish belief in a hostile person or power who in the end time would bring an attack against God's people - an attack which would be crushed by Jehovah or His Messiah. Psalm 2 gives a picture of the rebellion of the world kingdoms 'against the Lord and against his anointed.' The same sort of contest is described in Ezekiel 38, 39 and in Zechariah 12-14. In the Book of Daniel there are vivid descriptions of the Antichrist which find their echo in the writing of the apostles (cf., e.g. II Thess. 2:4 with Daniel 11:36f, and Rev. 13:1-8 with Daniel 7:8, 20f; 8:24; 11:28, 30).

In his eschatological discourse Christ warns against "the false Christ" and 'the false prophets' who would lead astray, if possible, even the elect (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). In Matthew 24:15 he refers to 'the abomination of desolation' spoken of by Daniel.

Paul gives us, in II Thessalonians 2:1-12, a very full description of the working of Antichrist, under the name of the "man of sin", in which he draws on the language and imagery of the Old Testament.

In I John 2:18, John shows that the coming of the Antichrist was an event generally expected by the Church. It is apparent, however, that he is more concerned about directing the attention of Christians to anti-Christian forces already at work ("even now are there many antichrists"). He says that teachers of erroneous views of the person of Christ (evidently Gnostic and Ebonite) are antichrists (I John 2:22; 4:3; II John 7).

In the Book of Revelation the Beast of Revelation (17:8) recalls the horned Beast of Daniel (7:8). He claims and is accorded divine homage and evil comes to its final decision.

during a period of frightful calamity?<sup>1</sup>

Gradually I was led to the conclusion that Dajjāl shall symbolised the abounding evil of the last time, while the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* provides, more than any other chapter of the Qur'ān, the means to identify him and guard our spiritual gains against the incursions of that evil. Anyone who tries to understand the *Sūrah* with patience and fullness of knowledge, through its frequent recitation and pondering over the lesson it contains, shall undoubtedly be able to guard his soul against that ruthless and insidious wickedness.

The *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* clearly shows the making of the seductive adversary of the last time, or, dwells upon his characteristics so minutely that he can be easily identified in every age and place, in whatever shape he might exist. The *Sūrah* appraises us of the underlying thought and content of this evil, the rallying-cry of its call; and prepares us to withstand and fight the evil out to the finish. The *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, thus, gives a lie to the concept that determine this wordly attitude of this principle of evil and firmly rejects it as a way of life.

### Subject matter of the *Sūrah*

When I turned to have a closer look at the *Sūrah* again, with the point of view I have just explained, I found it displaying the vista of a new world, conveying a range of meaning yet unknown to me, pertaining to the sole topic which can be denoted as the 'struggle between faith and materialism' or the 'Invisible Power and the world of causation'. The parables and illustrations, allusions

1. A number of the learned doctors of Faith and commentators of the Qur'ān unanimously hold the view that the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* is significantly related with the evil of Dajjāl. Muhammad Tāhir of Patan (in Gujrat) (d. 1578/986), an eminent Traditionalist and lexicographer relates the view held by earlier doctors that the Tradition of the Prophet extol this chapter as a sheet-anchor of safety against Dajjāl, who would appear in the end time. It would afford protection against deceit and cruelty to all those who would recite and try to understand it just as the Companions of the Cave were kept safe from the clutches of a ruthless emperor. He adds that the efficacy of the *Sūrah* is because of its inherent qualities known to the Prophet of Islam (*Majm'a Behār ul- Anwār*, see the entry *dajl*)

and explanations couched in the *Sūrah* teach, somewhere covertly and at places even overtly, the same lesson about the mystery of life.

This discovery filled me with delight. It unfolded before me a new aspect of the prophethood of Muhammad, and a recorded miracle of the Qur'ān. I had never imagined that the Scripture revealed in the sixth century A.D. so vividly depicts the features of a Godless civilization, working by signs and wonders and seeking Divine Worship, although it came into the world in the seventeenth century and ascended to its over-ripe culmination in the twentieth century. This God-opposing, seductive agency personified in the prophetic language as Dajjāl, or as a tyrant to deify the political power, had been graphically described centuries before it saw the light of day.

I put forth my views in an article written about 35 years back when I was teaching the exegesis of the Qur'ān at the Nadwatul 'Ulama, Lucknow. The article was published by Maulānā Syed Abul 'Ala Moudūdi in his journal *Tarjumān ul-Qur'ān*. I also had an opportunity to stay at Hyderabad for a short while in 1946, as a guest of the late Maulānā Syed Manāzīr Ahsan Gīlāni, the then Head of the Department of Theology in the Osmania University of Hyderabad. This provided me with an opportunity to discuss the matter with Maulānā Gīlāli who had gone through my article. He intended, as he then told me, to write a detailed commentary of this chapter of the Qur'ān and get it published in the monthly journal '*Al-Furqan*' of Lucknow. Later on, the said journal did bring out the entire article of the Maulānā, but, alas, after his death.

I again felt inclined to expand my thesis after going through the lengthy article of Maulānā Gīlāni which had been published years after my own earlier paper. I intended to highlight the inspiring theme of the *Sūrah* which is closely connected with the underlying concept of the philosophical thoughts and the intellectual movements of the last age, and, from that angle, to focus attention on the signs and indications, lessons and notes of warning contained in this chapter. I undoubtedly took advantage of the masterly exposition of the *Sūrah* by Maulānā Gīlāni. I have, however, not followed the



conventional pattern of the Quranic commentaries. On the contrary, it is, on the whole, an exposition of my own thoughts and impressions on the content and essence of the *Sūrah*.

### Key to the Personality of Dajjal

The name of Antichrist, known as Dajjāl<sup>1</sup> in Arabic, provides a clue for the comprehension of the hidden traits, characteristics and features of a concept whose distinguishing mark signifies evil and mischief, apostasy and enmity to God. Falsehood and deception are, then, the two central notions from which radiate the attributes, characteristics, functions and mission of what is symbolised in the person of Dajjāl.

The distinguishing mark and symbol of the present-day materialistic<sup>2</sup> civilization is trickery and swaggering deception revealing its dominant trait in every walk of life. Not a single aspect of the life today is free from its contaminating effect. Things are presented exactly by opposite names. A jumble of high-sounding names and nomenclatures, clichés and terminologies abound to the extent of meaninglessness: the outward appearance has hardly any relation to its content within; the beginning and the end, the objective in view and the means adopted to realise it, the ideals and concepts reverently put forth and the conduct of their propagators are all

1. Ibn Manzoor writes in *Lisān-ul-Arab*, the biggest lexicon of Arabic, that *ad-dājil* from which the word Dajjāl is derived means a liar or a deceiver. Dajjāl is also called the *False Christ* because the spell of his falsehood will be the most potent means of his deception. Abū 'Amar, whose explanation of the world is regarded as the best by Ibn Khālūveh says that Dajjāl being a cheat or a swindler, he resembles a plater coating a base metal with silver or gold to deceive others. Azhri too agrees with Abū 'Amar and holds that Dajjāl signifies an outward appearance or show to hide reality. For this reason gold coating is also termed as Dajjāl. Abul 'Abbās says that is so named because he would deceive others by presenting falsehood in the most attractive manner.
2. Independence, socialism, democracy, higher standard of living, economic prosperity, welfare state, fundamental rights, culture and civilization, artistic refinement, law, equity and justice are nowadays increasingly employed as slogans to deceive people.

diametrically opposed to each other. Similar is the case of all those philosophies, or, more accurately, jargons, which have bewitched people and taken the place of religion. An aura of inviolable sacredness is created round the teachings and pronouncements of its mentors, love and respect are demanded for them as articles of faith and the expression of the least doubt in their greatness or eminence is dubbed as reactionary and obscurantist denial of a well-known and accepted fact. And this is not true of the populace and laity alone; even the most intelligent and highly educated elite can be seen singing the praise of modernist ideologies without giving any thought to the sincerity and truthfulness of their propagators or to a dispassionate evaluation of the harm or good these ideologies have done to the humanity. Lacking both in moral courage and intellectual integrity, they are carried away by the fallacious claims of these ideologies; and so they remain completely oblivious of the well-being or its absence obtained as the end-result of their endeavours. All this is the product of the hypnotizing spell of a deceitful delusion conjured up by the seductive agencies which are no more than mere fore-runners of the Great Deluder, terribly more powerful and irresistible, in whatever time or clime he might make his appearance.

This spirit of falsehood, deceit and artful trickery pervades modern civilization simply because it has turned its back to the overlordship of God, prophethood, unseen realities and divine revelation; decided to depend exclusively on the senses and perceptible, immediate gains, power and pelf. And this is what this *Sūrah* seeks to contradict. The events recounted and the parables alluded to in this chapter point to the same moral—the brevity, uncertainty and vanity of the worldly life, its traps and illusions.

### **Role of Judaism and Christianity**

We have to acknowledge the fact, albeit regretfully, that the roles of Christianity (which lighted the path of Europe during the medieval ages) and the revengeful Judaism, despite fundamental differences in their faiths and beliefs, have played more or less a

complementary role in the making of the present-day materialistic civilization. Both these are, to be sure, equally responsible for pushing humanity towards an extremist and uncompromisingly materialistic outlook of life whose essential ingredients are denial of ethical-spiritual values and the teachings of the prophets. The Christian nations of the West which had already thrown off the yoke of the Church and Papacy by the end of the sixteenth century, and severed their relations from true Christianity preaching unity of God and clemency even earlier, adopted a purely utilitarian concept of life. The rapid strides in technological discoveries and manufacture of devastating weapons, coupled with a complete imbalance between knowledge and emotions, intellect and conscience, business and morals have confronted humanity with the imminent danger of its swift annihilation.

The world Jewry took a keen interest in the recent past, owing to a variety of causes pertaining to their racial pride, educational advancement, political ambitions, etc., to accelerate the pace of technological progress. This has enabled them to assume the control of modern civilization. They have gained the start in every field, literature and education, political thought and practical politics, press and industry—in fine, they have become the torch-bearers of modern western culture and its way of life. Even a cursory survey of the recent developments in international politics would convince us of the pivotal role played by the world Jewry in the western society. Now this civilization is rushing ahead, with all its treasure of knowledge and glittering progress, towards its doom—a product of unyielding despair and negative view of life. This is to happen, then, because of the falsehood and deceit, strife and dissension fomented by the Jews who have been allowed, regardless of their defiant and revengeful predisposition, treacherous ways and cloak and dagger methods, to strengthen their roots in the nutritious soil of the western society. The modern West has afforded them with an opportunity to nurse and flourish the secret springs of the Jewish life in a manner they have never had in the past. This is the tragedy of the modern times: a grave and menacing challenge not only to the Arabs who are presently faced with a life and death

struggle owing to it, but also an approaching danger for the entire mankind.

This is perhaps the reason why this chapter of the Qur'ān is intimately connected with the beliefs of the Jews and Christians. The *Sūrah* begins with a reference to what the latter regard as the most important article of their faith.

"Praise be to Allah Who hath revealed the Scripture unto His slave, and hath not placed therein any crookedness,

"(But hath made it) straight, to give warning of stern punishment from Him, and to bring unto the believers who do good works the news that theirs will be a fair reward.

"Wherein they will abide for ever;

"And to warn those who say; Allah hath chosen a son,

"(A thing) whereof they have no knowledge, nor (had) their fathers. Dreadful is the word that cometh out of their mouths. They speak naught but a lie."

(*Al-Kahf*: 1-5)

Christianity is the cradle of modern civilization which is passionately fond of the earthly life and its comforts: laying undue emphasis on the material welfare, this materialistic civilization has rejected all ethical-spiritual values, and has impetuously plunged headlong to capture power and glory, gold and riches. And this is the ground where Judaism finds a meeting-point with Christianity despite its differences and enmity with the latter.

One hardly finds any clear-cut reference to the Hereafter, Day of Judgement and requital, preparation for the eternal abode of bliss, description of Paradise and its rewards, finite nature of earthly life, denigration of covetousness, contempt for power and pelf, condemnation of fomenting trouble and strife, exhortation to about such moral virtues as contentment, righteousness and piety in the verbose narrations of the Old Testament. Absence of any emphasis in the old Testament on the fleeting nature of earthly sojourn in this terrestrial world and the eternal rewards and punishments in the Hereafter, thus, makes it conspicuously different from other revealed scriptures.

It is, therefore, not at all surprising if the history of Jewish

people finds expression in its will to capture power for power's sake, thirst for revenge, pangs of jealousy, racial pride, covetousness, egotism and chauvinism. All these inclinations and propensities are fostered and stimulated by their religious scriptures, literature and history; and we can find visible traces of these in their thoughts, philosophies, political movements, discoveries and intellectual endeavours. Likewise, their code of social conduct has no place for such values and sentiments as humanitarianism, generosity, self-abnegation, benevolence, forbearance, detachment from worldly pleasures and longing for reward in the Hereafter.

God has, for these very reasons, sternly admonished the Christians for their adoptionist belief in regard to Jesus Christ, which made him an associate in the Divinity of God. They have also been warned against the scrambles for the worldly goods and fleeting pleasures.

"Lo ! we have placed all that is on the earth as an ornament thereof that We may try them; which of them is best in conduct."

(*Al-Kahf* : 7)

Administering a reprove to those who deny Hereafter and place confidence in their worldly possessions, the Qur'an says:

"Say: Shall We inform you who will be the greatest losers by their works?

"Those whose effort goeth astray in the life of the world, and yet they reckon that they do good work."

(*Al-Kahf* : 104-5)

Unflinching belief in the Hereafter, unseen realities, Creator of the Universe and His Omnipotence is, thus, the central theme of the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*. In its rationale, motive and judgement this belief runs counter to the spirit, ideation and conception of the materialistic view of life which places confidence only in the senses and their perceptions. The latter loudly extols earthly benefits, sensual pleasures and racial and national superiority while the *Sūrah* scornfully rejects these as abominably loathsome. The *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, in this wise, drives home the uncertainties and paradoxes of our earthly life, for, this worldly attitude of the Christian nations has led them more than any other people to promote and patronize

the materialistic world-view. The Jews, have, after the Christians, assumed its direction and patronage, although they have been the greatest adversaries of Christianity since its inception. Now this civilization is destined to attain its culminating point under the inspiration and guidance of the Jews, one of whom would, undoubtedly, show signs of the Great Antichrist or *Dajjāl-i-Akbar*, by overshadowing all the other standard-bearers of deceit and falsehood, irreligion and godlessness.

The Prophet of Islam is reported to have said that the recitation of this *Sūrah*, particularly its initial portion, would save one from the evils of *Dajjāl*. There is a sequence and significance in the initial and closing verses of the *Sūrah* which can easily be discerned. The *Sūrah*, as a whole, is thus, intimately connected with the scourge of *Dajjāl*.

The contents of this *Sūrah* can be divided into four parts which unfold its central theme.

- (1) The story of the Companions of the Cave.
- (2) Parable of the owner of two gardens.
- (3) The story of Prophet Moses and Khidhr.
- (4) The story of Zul-Qarnain.

### **The Two World-Views**

Normally, there is a necessary connection between the cause and the effect (or consequence) in a physical phenomenon. In other words, the cause or sum total of circumstances are inherent in the effect, i.e. their presence gives rise to the effect. The causes and effect are thus inter-dependent and the former almost always leads, in the given circumstances, to the appearance of the latter. Now, there are people who can never look beyond the basic causal dependence capable of analysis by speculative thought of scientific observation and, therefore, their view is limited to the material, perceptible objects and events. They naturally, believe in the universal causative origin of all phenomena. To them, no effect or consequence can appear without the cause nor do they recognise any power which can intervene between the cause and the effect. They maintain universality of the cause-effect relationship, existing

outside and independent of any intelligent and All-Powerful Being which can introduce or modify the effect with or without the cause in accordance with its will. The people believing in the objective existence of the external world and asserting its primacy and eternity elevate the matter to the position of God. Their view implies denial of everything else save matter, which is, to them, the common source of the origin of all that exists or takes places. They deny the existence of the Creator and the Lord of the Universe whose writ runs supreme in this cosmos, His omnipotence, the Day of Judgment and the Life after death. As a consequence, they devote their energies to discovering the necessary relationship between the cause and the effect, the common source of the diverse natural phenomena, matter and its properties and the physical laws, with a view to commanding these forces of nature. Their overweening quest to capture the matter, unfortunately, makes them the slave of the material world. Matter becomes the Alpha and Omega for them; everything else, even the consciousness, mind and intellect become a product of matter, a reflection of the external material world. And, when they gain control over some of these forces and put them in requisition for their selfish ends, they begin to behave as demigods, claiming overlordship over other people, their life and property, either in their own right or in the name of society, party or nation. Nothing can then deter them from inflicting the most horrible tortures on their fellow human beings whom they brand with the infamy of opposing their cherished social or political views of life.

There is another world-view essentially different, in its basic postulates as well as in the solution of the fundamental question of philosophy, from the one already mentioned. It proceeds from the principle that apart from the cause and effects, physical laws, matter, substance and its properties, there is a transcendental, omnipotent Power which predetermines the cause and effect. The functional dependence of the cause on this All-Pervasive Power is as absolute and exclusive as that of the effect on the cause. Every physical phenomenon, event and incident depends wholly on the will and pleasure of God, who brings into existence, whatever He likes, from non-existence with or without a primordial cause. He creates



conditions for the action of the cause and, if He so desires, severs the functional relationship between the objects themselves; for, His relationship also exists outside and independent of the matter, and is introduced in the world of phenomena by the will of God. He is thus the Supreme Cause, the Cause of all causes.

The creation of the planetary system and the causative law does not make this universe free, even for a moment, from the absolute control of its Creator nor is it capable of becoming so. The causative origin of phenomena too has never been a whit more than a passive instrument designed to carry out the will of God, nor was it ever endowed with an objective character, striking off the fetters of Divine bondage. No material object can claim freedom of action nor cast off its shackles. For it is God who has, with His infinite wisdom, united the properties with material objects, and causes with their consequences. Verily, He alone creates and annihilates, unites and separates, and brings into being whatever He likes out of naught.

“But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith unto it : Be ! and it is.”

(*Ya'sin* : 82)

This holds out a consistent view of the nature and society-social life as well as natural phenomena. At the same time it recognises those imperceptible yet far more potent and effective causes which shape the human conduct and determine the destiny of nations. The operation of these causes is remarkably more effective and their outcome more far-reaching and momentous than those attended by observable causal relation and environments.

The operative agencies in this view of life and the world are faith, righteous action, ethical conduct, unflinching submission to God, justice and equity, mercy and love working against other intangible dark forces represented by atheism and godlessness, cruelty and selfishness, vice and sinfulness and sedition and sabotage.

Anybody betaking himself to these spiritual-moral norms without, of course, disregarding the physical laws of nature, shall find the entire cosmos cooperating with and assisting him in the

achievement of his objectives. Divine succour shall bear a hand to him and, not unoften, even the physical laws of causation shall be made subservient to his cause. Celestial miracles shall unfold themselves to espouse his cause. On the contrary, whoever shall rely solely on the physical laws without any regard to the spiritual-ethical norms of morality, he shall ultimately find the entire universe standing against him. The forces of nature he has captured shall defy and deceive him : instead of being subservient to him, these shall be hard upon him; his dependence on the artificial contrivances shall go on increasing till he is debased by the most pitiable servitude of his own making.

### **Surat-ul-Kahf : A Story of Struggle between Faith and Materialism**

*Sūrat-ul-Kahf* is the story of an unending struggle between the two ideologies or concepts diametrically opposed to each other. One of these is materialism denoting the primacy and objective existence of the external material world. The other one asserts the existence of realities which lie beyond the range of human perception, as, for instance, the existence of God, moral-spiritual forces and their interaction, and so forth. The *Sūrah* explains the meaning and the purpose of faith in the Ultimate Reality and warns man against leaning exclusively of observable environment, grounds and consequences which eventually lead to the denial of God and His authority.

## II

# THE STORY OF THE CAVE

Of the four stories told in this *Sūrah* the first one relates to the Companions of the cave. Who were these Companions of the Cave, what is the moral and wisdom concealed in the story, why did the Qur'ān verify the tale and why has man yielded to its fascination ever since it was recounted? These are some of the questions which ought to be given thought for gaining an understanding of the *Sūrah*.

### The Christian Sources

Before we narrate the story as told by the Qur'ān in its own inimitable way, presenting only the core of the story intertwined with moral lessons, admonitions, warnings and good tidings, let us have a look at the traditions and the hagiographical literature handed down in regard to this legend. Thereafter, these versions can be compared with the Qur'ānic description to find out how much they corroborate or contradict the story told by the Qur'ān.

The story of the Cave does not find a place in the Old Testament since the incident is reported to have happened in the earlier phase of the Christian history. This was the time when the faith of the Christians was matured and their numbers were fast multiplying owing to the fiery zeal of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ. By that time even the later books of the Old Testament had been compiled and, therefore the Jews could hardly be expected to preserve the legend in their Scriptures. The fascinating story, on the other hand, was divinely inspiring for the Christian who were irresistibly carried away by its charming mystery and electrifying character. The story furnished an ennobling example of the living faith of the earliest Christians, their unfaltering adherence to the revealed truth and their readiness to sacrifice everything for the

sanctity for the religious precepts. It had a meaning and a lesson for the believer who considered it his birthright to assert the inalienable right of conscience. Not only this, the story can exhort, inspire and awaken even today the spirit of sacrifice and struggle for the defence of one's faith and the way of life. These were, then, the distinctive features of the story which made it an immortal drama stirring such a large number of people in different times and climes. This also explains why it was handed down so meticulously by one generation to another. Now we have to see the story, extant in a number of languages and in different versions pertaining to the early Christian sources, to find out what the early narrators of the story thought of it. An outline of the story briefly summarised by Ignazio Guidi for the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, from the earliest Christian sources is given below :--

"The legend of the Seven Sleepers is one of the most widespread and pleasing of hagiographical legends. The elements of the story common to the earliest text are briefly as follows<sup>1</sup>:

"The Emperor Decius comes to Ephesus<sup>2</sup> and there revives the worship of idols, commanding that all, and especially the Christians should offer sacrifices to them; some Christians

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1. Edward Gibbon's description of the story in the 'Decline and fall of the Roman Empire (vol. III, pp. 413-14; London : 1908)' discusses the sources and historicity of the event but unnecessarily also gives vent to his prejudice against Islam and its Prophet.
  2. An Ancient Ionian city on the coast of Asia Minor was situated near the modern village of Ayasoluk (Saljuk) in the Izmir il of Turkey. In historic times it was located on the lower slopes of the hills, Coressus and Pion, which rise out of the fertile plain near the mouth of river Cayster. The temple of Artemis or Diana, to which Ephesus owed much of its fame, was in the plain about one mile north-east of Pion (modern Panjir Dag). The Romans had made it the capital of their West-Asiatic possessions and it rose to become a well-known trade centre of its day.

The cult of Artemis combined, like other idolatrous forms of worship elsewhere, with the stinking pleasures of the flesh. (For further details see Blackie's *A Manual of Bible History*).

abjure the faith, others remain steadfast and suffer tortures. Seven youths, (or, according to some texts eight<sup>1</sup>), who live in the imperial palace and whose names are variously given<sup>2</sup>, are accused of being secretly Christians, and, when brought before Decius, refuse to sacrifice to the idols. In the hope that they may waver in their resolution, Decius grants them a respite and then leaves Ephesus. The youths leave the city and hide in a cave in the neighbouring Mount Anchilus. One of them, Diomedes (or Lamblichus) disguised in rags goes down in the city, to enquire about what was happening in it and to buy food. Decius, returning after a short time to Ephesus, orders the youth to be conducted in his presence. Diomedes informs his companions of the order; sadly they take food and then they all fall by divine Providence into a deep, long sleep. When Decius cannot find the youths in Ephesus, he summons their parents, who try to excuse themselves for the flight of their sons, and tell that they are hidden in a cave in Mount Anchilus. Decius orders the entrance of the cave to be blocked with large stones, so that the youth may be buried alive. Two Christians, Theodore and Rufinus, write the story of the young martyrs on metal plates, which they place under the stones closing the cave. After 307 years<sup>3</sup> in the reign of the emperor Theodosius II, a heresy breaks out, led by bishop Theodore, denying the resurrection of the dead, and the emperor is greatly perturbed. Then God suggests to Adolius, the proprietor of the field where the cave is, to build a sheepfold for his flocks; for this purpose the workman use the stones which close the entrance of the cave and thus the cave is reopened. God awakens the youths, who think they have slept only one night, and exhort each other in turn to suffer martyrdom at the hands of Decius, if need be. Diomedes goes down to Ephesus as usual, and is so surprised to see the cross over the gates of the city that he asks

1. Cf. M. Huber, *Die Wanderlegende von den Siebenschlufem*, (1910) p. 9 ff.
2. Huber, pp. 91, 492.
3. For variants (353 years, etc.) see Huber, p. 100f.

a passer-by if it is really Ephesus. He is anxious to return to his companions with the news, but first he buys, paying for with the money he had about him, which was of the time of Decius. The vendor and the market-people, seeing the ancient money, think that the youth has found a hidden treasure and wish to share it with him; they drag him with threats through the city; many people assemble, and the youth looks in vain among them for some one of his acquaintance. The bishop and the governor question Diomedes, who narrates the whole story, and invites them to come to the cave and see his companions. They climb the hill and find the two tablets of lead, which confirm the youth's story; they then enter the cave and find the companions alive and shining in appearance. Theodosius is informed of what has happened and comes to Ephesus to the cave. One of the youths, Maximilian (Achillides or others) tells him that, in order to demonstrate the truth of the resurrection, God had caused them to fall asleep and then resuscitated them before the Judgement Day : after this the youth fall asleep in death<sup>1</sup>. A basilica was erected on the spot."<sup>2</sup>

In so far as the historicity of the legend is concerned, no critic has been able to prove it as entirely baseless nor has anybody demonstrated it as simply a flight of imagination. The story is extant in a number of versions : Greek, Syriac, Latin, Coptic Arabic, Armenian, Ethiopic and Georgian, and there is also no reason to doubt the authenticity of the ancient texts. Edward Gibbon, who normally gives little credence to miraculous and outlandish stories, writes of this legend :

"The origin of this marvellous fable cannot be ascribed to

1. The story has been told by Ibn Jarīr Tabrī and other commentators of the Qur'ān on the authority of Muhammad ibn Is'haq but owing to the absence of adequate details as also of more reliable sources discovered later on, a good many myths had been introduced by them vide Tafsīr-i-Kabīr, vol. XV, pp. 123-6. The original Christian sources have therefore been given preference.
2. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics : (1934) Art. Seven Sleepers : Vol. XI, p. 428.

the pious fraud and credulity of the Modern Greeks, since the authentic tradition may be traced within half a century of the supposed miracle. James of Sarug<sup>1</sup>, a Syrian bishop, who was born only two years after the death of younger Theodosius, has devoted one of his two hundred and thirty homilies to the praise of the young men of Ephesus. Their legend before the end of the sixth century, was translated from the Syriac into the Latin language, by the care of Gregory of Tours. The hostile communions of the East preserve their memory with equal reverence; and their names are honourably inscribed in the Roman, the Abyssinian, and the Russian calendar, Nor has their reputation been confined to the Christian word<sup>2</sup>."

The duration of the time spent by the Companions of the Cave in deep slumber has been variously given in different versions. Some Christian writers reckon it to be as much as 353 or 373 years but the general consensus of opinion is that the youth slept for a period ranging from 300 to 307 years. In round numbers, 300 years in the solar calendar would come to 309 in the lunar calendar.

Ibn Kathir is of the view that number of years spent in the cave, from the time the youths miraculously fell into sleep to the time they were awakened, was made known to the Prophet of Islam through revelation. The period given by Ibn Khatir too is 300 years according to the solar calendar, and 309 according to the lunar calendar. He further says that since every hundred solar years are equal to one hundred and three of the lunar calendar, the Qur'an says : "and added nine" after "three hundred years".

Most of the Christian sources as well as Gibbon and other Muslim writers hold the view that the youths concealed themselves in the cave during the persecution by Decius (A.D. 250), known by

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1. James, one of the orthodox fathers of the Syrian Church, was born A.D. 452; he began to compose his sermons, A.D. 474; he was made bishop of Batnae, in the district of Sarug, and province of Mesopotamia, A.D. 519, and died A.D. 521 (Assemani, tom.i, pp. 288,289). For the homily de Pueris Ephesinis, see pp. 335,339.
  2. Edward Gibbon : The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; London (1908); Vol.III, pp. 413-414.



the name of Daqiānūs to the Arab historians. Decius is known to have instituted an organised persecution of the Christian throughout the Roman empire. The second sovereign mentioned in the tradition is Theodosius II (408-450 A.D.) in whose reign the youths are reported to have been awakened. Taking 250 A.D. and 450 A.D. we get an interval of 200 years. Gibbon relies on the tradition which give this period as one hundred and eighty-seven years and, taking his stand upon it, exercises his wit to ridicule the period mentioned in the Qur'ān. Some of the earliest as well as recent commentators of the Qur'ān for instance, Jamāluddīn Qāsimī and Abul 'Alā Maudūdī have, therefore, tried to explain away this apparent contradiction by putting forth the view that the words "three hundred years and add nine", mentioned in the Qur'ān, simply repeat the then current traditional view instead of indicating any definite period of the deep slumber of the youths. They argue that the above-mentioned passage is to be read in the context of the preceding verses : "(Some) will say : They were three, their dog the fourth ..." This view is attributed to Qatādah and Mutrif ibn 'Abdullah. The commentators who prefer this interpretation also point out the succeeding verses which says : "Allah is Best Aware how long they tarried." Their contention is that if God had revealed the exact period, He would not have drawn attention towards His Own perfect knowledge immediately after the verses in question. This exegesis is ascribed to Ibn 'Abbās but Alūsī, another commentator, points out that since Ibn 'Abbās gives the number of the Companions of the Cave as seven, he ought to have placed reliance on the periods too, for, both the verses mentioning the number of the companions and the period of slumber are followed by a similar warning about the true knowledge being with God alone.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, several other eminent commentators of the Qur'ān who do not agree with this explanation. They hold the view that it is not correct to put a construction on any verse which is not explicitly clear. Similarly, no interpretation should be acceptable unless it can be reliably explained with the help of

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1. *Rūh-ul-Ma'ani, (Sūrat-ul-Kahf).*

elaborate details. Imām Rāzī, a commentator of note, says in the *Tafsīr Kabīr* ;

"The verses intervening between the revelation : '(Some) will say : They were three, their dog the fourth ....." and the verse giving out the number of years show that the two are entirely unconnected. On the other hand, the passages 'So contend not concerning them except with an outward contending', and 'Say : Allah is Best Aware how long they tarried', do not refer to any tradition or fable mentioned earlier. These can, therefore, only mean that instead of relying on what others (Jews and Christians) say, one should pin one's faith in the revealed truth.<sup>1</sup>

Sheikh-ul-Islam Ibn Taimiyah says : " The view taken by certain commentators, on the basis of the words : 'Say, Allah is Best Aware', that the Qur'ān quotes the tradition (in regard to the period of sleep) current among the Jews and Christians, is erroneous. The period indicated is not repetition of what others say : it is a revelation from God." <sup>2</sup>

It has to be remembered that the so-called discrepancy pointed out by Gibbon in the period of sleep mentioned in the Qur'ān, proceeds from the assumption that the youths concealed themselves in the cavern during the Decian persecution. Decius was proclaimed Emperor in September 249 A.D. and died in June, 251 A.D. It seems most probable that Decius was assigned the role of a villain in this tragic drama, by the later scribes, owing to his atrocious cruelty in the persecution of those Christians who disobeyed his edict to perform a pagan religious sacrifice<sup>3</sup> in the presence of duly

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1. *Tafsīr-i-Kabīr*, Vol. III.

2. *Al-Jawāb al-Suḥīḥ liman baddala dīn il-Masīḥ*.

3. See Encyclopaedia Britannica (1968), Vol. 1, p. 157, Art. Decius. It was, however, not under the reign of Decius, but much earlier, under Trajan (98-117 A.D.) that those accused of Christianity were first directed to offer sacrifice to the heathen gods. Those who refused to do so were to be punished for a crime exposed to capital punishment. Under Trajan were martyred Symeon, Bishop of Jerusalem, and Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch. (George H. Dyer : History of the Christian Church, New York-1896, Vol. I, pp.65-66)

appointed commissioners, who were to issue a certificate (Libellus) that they had done so. This imperial edict is reported to have been issued in June, 250, and then early in 251, but a few months before the death of Decius, the Commissioners seem to have ceased their activities. Decius, who ruled for less than two years, had to spend the greater part of his brief rule amidst the cares of war, first against the Emperor Philip and then against the Goths. His final engagement took place on a swampy ground in the Dobruja in June 251 and ended in the defeat and death of Decius.<sup>1</sup> He perhaps never got the time to visit his far off eastern dominions : at least the accounts of his rule given by the historians are silent about any such excursion by him.

The ecclesiastical writers of the fourth or fifth centuries seem to have exaggerated the earlier martyrdoms owing to the implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the idolaters of their own times. Gibbon says, on the authority of Origen, that the number of early martyrs was very inconsiderable and that, under the rigorous persecution of Decius, only ten men and seven women suffered for the profession of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> These accounts are, however, silent about any persecution of the Christians in or around Ephesus under the orders of Decius.

It seems that the concealment of the Christian youths was a local affair of minor significance to attract the attention of the historians. On the other hand, their miraculous awakening after the prolonged sleep, their dramatic appearance in the city and their presentation before the authorities must have a memorable affair raising a tumultuous commotion in the entire Christendom. The story of the Seven Sleepers, with its reminiscences of classical mythology, must have captured the imagination of the clergy and the laity, the poets and the historians, making it one of the most enchanting fables of the day. The point of the story does not,

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1. *Historians' History of the World* (London-1908), Vol. VI, pp. 413-14 and Edward Gibbon : *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* : (London-1909), Vol. I, pp. 246-50.
  2. Edward Gibbon : *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* : (London-1909), Vol. II, pp. 98.

therefore, lie in the name of any given Emperor mentioned by the later scribes but in the fact that the begening of the period of slumber coincided with the reign of an Emperor who persecuted the Christians. Viewed from this angle, it seems highly probable that the Seven Sleepers hid themselves in the reign of Hadrian<sup>1</sup> (P.Ælius Hadrianus) who donned the imperial purple for a fairly long time

1. "Hadrian learnt on August 11, 117 in Syria, of Trajan's death and assumed the government. For 12 of his 20 years as emperor Hadrian was absent from Rome, which was perhaps the most notable feature of this principate. In 121 Hadrian left Rome on his first travels. He toured first to the west and then to the east; traversing Asia Minor, he returned by way of Sicily to Rome by the end of 126. The next year was spent at Rome, and, after a visit to Africa, he set out on his second great journey in September 128. He travelled by way of Athens. In the spring of 129 he again visited Asia Minor and Syria, where he invited the kings and princes of the East to a meeting at Samosata. Having passed the winter at Antioch, he set out for the south in 130. He ordered Jerusalem to be rebuilt under the name of Aelia Capitolina, to be peopled with gentile Roman citizen, and name of Aelia Capitolina, to be peopled with gentile Roman citizens, and then made his way through Arabia to Egypt. Hadrian returned through Syria to Europe, but was obliged to hurry back to Palestine to deal with the Jewish revolt that broke out in 132. For a while he commanded in the field himself, then in 134, leaving the conduct of affairs in the hands of Julius Severus he returned to Rome. He died at Baiae on June 10, 138.

Palestine blazed with the last and most desperate of its rebellions, for three years, during the reign of Hadrian. When the end came in 135, Palestine was a ruined and largely depopulated city. The holy city was henceforth prohibited to the Jews.

Hadrian was "proud and vainglorious, envious and destructive, hasty and revengeful, inquisitive into other man's affairs, and often induced by sycophants to acts of cruelty and injustice. He permitted the revival of a bad disposition, which it was the whole study of his life to correct or to conceal." (*The Historians' History of the World*: (London-1908), Vol. VI, p. 281.)

"Hadrian was no old Roman", writes George H. Dyer, "but a modern spirit, curious, religious, and skeptical. He maintained Trajan's policy, but cautioned against wholesale accusations." *A History of the Christian Church* : New York-1896, Vol. I, p. 66.)

from 117 to 138. In April 129 Hadrian undertook a long journey to the eastern provinces of the empire, from which he did not return to take up his residence on the Tiber until the year 134. It is not necessary that the persecution of the Christians of Ephesus should have taken place in the presence of Hadrian or even under his orders. In the extensive dominions of the Roman Empire, any magistrate who exercised in the provinces the authority of the emperor, or of the senate, and to whose hands alone the jurisdiction of life and death of the subjects was entrusted, could have behaved as a remorseless tyrant. It is not improbable that some such functionaries of the State, stimulated by motives of avarice or personal resentment, might have been more zealous in enforcing the royal edict. This is no mere assumption, for we can find analogous examples in every age. We can thus reasonably conclude that the Companions of the Cave concealed themselves during the reign of Hadrian, who visited Ephesus, and they were raised from their deep slumber in the time of the younger Theodosius. This, if agreed, would not only bring the Christian traditions in conformity with the period indicated in the Qur'ān, but also sap the very foundations which provided Gibbon with an opportunity to deride the Divine revelation. And this appears to be all the more reasonable because no extant source is definite about the beginning or even the end of the prolonged sleep of the youths. There is also a wide variation between the periods reckoned on the basis of various sources by different authorities. The Syriac sources, for example, claim that the Seven Sleepers woke up in 425 or 437 A.D. while Greek tradition fix the incident in 446 A.D. or the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Theodosius II.

It is our unalterable faith that the Qur'ān, being the custodian of the revealed truth and earlier scriptures, is much more trustworthy than all those ancient texts which were always open to change and amendments.

The persecution of the Christians, falsely charged with burning the Roman capital, and punished with the most horrid tortures, had been initiated by Nero as early as in 64 A.D. and it continued unabated under Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. There were occasional periods of peace in between long years of

persecution till Constantine embraced Christianity in the beginning of the fourth century. The perplexity produced by the scanty and discordant historical material about the early years of Christianity is another reason for not placing reliance, as did Gibbon, on any particular tradition or an ancient text in regard to the exact period and dates of the prolonged sleep of the Seven Sleepers. After all, the hiding of a band of unknown person in a far off province of the empire, would have been a minor incident of no significance. Their awakening, on the other hand, during the reign of an Emperor who professed the faith of the persecuted fugitives must have stirred the imagination of the people.

The real significance of the story can, however, be realised in the context of the raging controversy about the resurrection of the body and retribution in the Hereafter. An irrefutable evidence, an overwhelming demonstration of the life after death was then required to revive the belief in resurrection, and the event did happen to proclaim this eternal circulated story throughout the Roman empire. As it could be hoped, in such circumstances, the story circulating from mouth to mouth would necessarily have become somewhat vague in regard to its details and the dates before it was reduced to writing.

### Why the story was re-told in Qur'ān

The reason for the revelation of *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, as related by Muhammad ibn Is'haq, is reported to be certain questions asked from the Prophet Muhammad by the idolaters of Mecca who were instructed by the Jewish rabbis to do so as a test of his prophethood.<sup>1</sup> One of the three questions of the cave. Even if this Tradition were

1. Ibn Jarir relates on the authority of ibn 'Abbās that the Quraish had deputed Nadhr ibn al-Hārith and 'Uqba ibn Abī Muyit to the Jewish doctors of Yathrib to ask them about Muhammad and his teachings, since the Jews were considered to be the custodians of ancient scriptures and also possessing the knowledge of the prophets of yore. The story has also been related by Marmaduke Pickthall who says that when the two delegates arrived in Yathrib, they told Jewish rabbis about the character and teachings of

(Continued on next page)

correct, it cannot be regarded as the sole reason for the selection of an event, amongst innumerable incidents of unbridled cruelties in the name of religion, for narration in the Qur'an. In any case, the event normally regarded as the immediate cause of the revelation of any particular *Sūrah*, and sometimes given undue emphasis by certain doctors of religion, is not given much weight by the eminent commentators. The Qur'an was, in truth and reality, revealed for exposition of the Truth and presentation of the Divine Guidance which man had lost because of his negligence and wickedness. Ever since the beginning of Divine revelations, the inclinations and propensities, dispositions and natural affections of man have not undergone any notable change; he still needs, as ever, the same

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Muhammad and begged them to inform if he was to be believed. The Jewish doctors instructed them to ask three questions; for they said, Muhammad would answer them correctly on if he were a true prophet. "Ask them", said the Rabbis, "of some youths who were old, what was their fate, for they have a strange story; and ask him of the much-travelled man who reached the limits of the east and west, what was his history; and ask him of the Spirit, what it is. If he is able to answer these questions correctly, then follow him; if he is unable to give correct replies, then treat him as an impostor." The two emissaries then turned back to Mecca and told the Quraish that they had returned with a crucial test for Muhammad. They put all the questions to Muhammad, as directed by the Jews. The Prophet said that he would surely answer them upon the morrow, without adding "if it pleases God". As a reproof for that omission, the wished for revelation was withheld from him for fifteen days. The Quraish bitterly reproached the Prophet for his failure to answer the questions, but at length Gabriel brought revelation (*Sūrat-ul-Kahf*) containing replies of all the three questions. The revelation contained an admonition for the Prophet's grief as well as the story of the youth and the much-travelled man. It also repeated the question put by the idolaters about spirit (They will ask thee concerning the Spirit, Say : The Spirit is by command of my Lord and of knowledge ye have been vouchsafed but little- (XVII : 85). It is, however, to be noted that one of the intervening narrators of this Tradition viz. 'Akramah, from whom Ibn Is'haq relates it, not being trustworthy it cannot be treated as perfectly authentic.



intellectual and moral bases of the Right Path which were revealed to the earlier prophets and which reached their eventual consummation in the teachings and the life of the last Prophet, Muhammad, on whom be peace and blessings of God. This is the cogent reason, the underlying cause much more potent and intelligible than any isolated incident narrated as the background for any particular piece of revelation. Shāh Waliullah (d.1176/1763), one of the greatest savants of the Qur'ān, has gone at length to explain this fact.

“Normally, the commentators of the Qur'ān describe some incidents or events to explain the background of the verses dealing with or containing divine commands, as if it were the sole reason for the revelation of that particular verse. This is, however, an accepted fact that the central theme, and the chief object for which the Qur'ān has been revealed are guidance of mankind, eradication of heretical beliefs and abandonment of immoral practices. The existence of these vices among any people is, thus, a sufficient reason for the revelation of divine guidance and commandments. Cruelty and wickedness of any people provide, in the same way, the ground for revelations designed to eradicate these evils. Reckless disregard of the bounties of God or obstinate indifference to the portents mentioned in Qur'ān are, in fact, the chief reasons for revelation of verses conveying grim warnings to the evil-doers. Except for those incidents which have been hinted at in any particular verse, and which happened during the life-time of the Prophet or earlier, there is really no need to go into those details which have been laboriously gone into by certain commentators of the Qur'ān.”<sup>1</sup>

*Sūrat-ul-Kahf* was revealed at Mecca at a time when the small band of helpless Muslims was facing almost the same type of religious persecution which had led the Companions of the Cave to hide themselves in a cavern from the fury of the then Roman Emperor. A picturesque description of the conditions then obtaining in Mecca, preserved in the Qur'ān, illustrates the perilous situation

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1. *Al-Fauz-ul-Kabir*

of the Meccan Muslims- and this can perhaps apply equally to the youths of Ephesus seeking refuge in the cave.

“And remember, when ye were few and reckoned feeble in the land, and were in fear lest men should extirpate you.....”

(*Al-Anfāl* : 26)

The collections of the Prophet's Traditions and his biographies are replete with incidents of untold oppressions and atrocious persecutions inflicted on his followers-Bilāl, 'Ammār, Khabbāb, Mus'ab, Summaiya and others. These atrocities are fiendish enough to pain and bruise every sensitive heart. The mounting wave of barbarous oppression was met by exemplary endurance of the faithful; yet, without a ray of hope and tired of the ceaseless tortures, the patience of the poor victims was reaching its breaking point. Hooked in the frightful claws of devouring brutality, the Meccan Muslims were placed, literally speaking, between the devil and the deep sea. Their struggle for life and death has been deftly depicted by the Qur'ān.

“..... When the earth, vast as it is, was straitened for them, and their own souls were straitened for them till they bethought them that there is no refuge from Allah save toward Him.” (*At-Taubah* : 118)

It was precisely at this moment of sad despair that the divine revelation descended with a comforting and soothing message, rehearsed a tale of miraculous succour to the oppressed and held out the promise of prosperity after adversity, comfort after suffering and victory after defeat. The meaning and lesson of this wonderful story lay, beyond the accepted categories of human experience and speculative thought, in the ultimate unreality of the positions of the tyrant and his victim; it demonstrated how God could deliver a small and oppressed band of helpless youths from the tyranny of any encircling violence-passionate, capricious, easily irritable and formidable in anger-possessing all the sinews of power and position, wealth and glory. It disclosed how God brings out dead from the alive and alive from the dead, turns a furious and blood-thirsty enemy into a gracious and affectionate ally and allows a believer to profit by the inheritance of a non-believer.

## Meccan Muslims and Companions of the Cave

In this darkest hour of tragic despair and helpless melancholy, the Qur'ân narrated to the Meccan Muslims the stories of Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Pharaoh and the Companions of the Cave. The first was the tale of a Prophet raised from slavery to kingship, the second was the story of a nation and a Prophet clasped in the clutches of a tyrant king, while the last one spoke of a handful of helpless youths subjected to the most gruelling test by a cruel oppressor. These tales differ from one another in so far as the time, the circumstances and the principal actors of these sinister dramas are concerned but the common chord of a similar objective and an identical ending runs through all of them. All these tales demonstrate how the overruling will of God imposes itself, in some inscrutable and incomprehensible way, and how He allows the believer to gain ground upon the non-believer, the God-fearing upon the blasphemer, the victim upon the tyrant and the poor upon the rich. Divine justice is very often dispensed in such wise leaving no speak of doubt in the omnipotence of God. Here is the moral drawn from the story of Joseph by the Qur'ân.

“In their history verify there is a lesson for men of understanding. It is no invented story but a confirmation of the existing (Scripture) and a detailed explanation of everything, and a guidance and a mercy for folk who believe.”

*(Joseph : 111)*

After recapitulating the story of Prophet Hüd, the Qur'ân says :

“And all that We relate unto thee of the story of the messengers is in order that thereby we may make firm thy heart. And herein hath come unto thee the Truth and an exhortation and a reminder for believers.” *(Hud : 120)*

Now, when we consider the appallingly desperate situation in which the Muslims of Mecca had then been placed by Providence, the striking similarity between them and the Companions of the Cave stands out clearly in our view. The youths of Ephesus concealed themselves in the cave to preserve their faith and worship; they

remained in it till the inevitable end of the most powerful empire of the day. The empire was presided over by numerous zealous tyrants as well as most amiable and philosophic characters, but, disdaining every consideration of justice or moral virtue, everyone submitted the innocent and passively obedient followers of Jesus Christ to horrible tortures. At last, the Seven Sleepers woke up during the reign of an emperor whose respectable attachment to the Gospel urged him to further the interests of true religion and restore justice to those whom it had been denied earlier.

The Muslims of Mecca too had to endure the most bitter trials and tribulations, as if standing on the lava of violence under the scorching Sun, until the divine succour came in the form of permission to migrate from Mecca. They were allowed to take shelter in the spacious cavern commonly known by the name of Yathrib. God had, however, destined these new fugitives and refugees to accomplish a greater and glorious task than that fated for the earlier ones. The Meccan exiles were chosen to disseminate and flourish the message of God to the four-corners of the world.

“He it is Who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it conqueror of all religion however, much idolaters may be averse.”

(*As-Saff* : 9)

Apostleship of Muhammad, therefore, did not merely signify consummation of Prophethood in his person; it also charged his followers with the responsibility imposed on the earlier prophets.

“Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah.” (*Aal-i-Imrān* : 110)

The Prophet too, on whom be the peace and blessings, directed the Muslims thus :

“You have been sent to relieve and not to create difficulties.”<sup>1</sup>

For the believers, although a minority, the town of Yathrib was too small a place, cut off from the mainstream of life in Arabia.

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1. *Tirmidhi*, on the authority of Abū Huraira.

In fact, the future of the entire humanity was dependent on these persons, who were, in the words of Jesus Christ, the salt of the earth. This small band of the believers was destined to resuscitate the dying world and breathe fresh life into it. God had, therefore, decided not to destroy these persons like the companions of the Cave, nor did He allow them to fall in a deep slumber or to renounce the world and live like hermits. On the contrary, they were burdened with the responsibility of preaching the religion of God, of fighting falsehood and irreligion and of asserting the supremacy of the one and only God over everything else.

“And fight them untill persecution is no more, and religion is all for Allah.” (*Al-Anfāl* : 39)

When Diomedes, one of the companions of the Cave, came out of his cavern, he found an entirely new world—so different that he could no longer recognise the once familiar confines of his native city. The lad was astonished to find the cross over the gates of Ephesus and the country ruled by an Emperor of his own faith. Likewise, when the Meccan refugees went back to their native land they found the banner of Islam fluttering over the city, the keys of Kabah in the hands of the Prophet, the humiliated religion being held in the highest esteem and the idols worshipped by the pagans cast aside with contemptuous ignominy. Those who had been forced to leave Mecca as the humiliated and harassed immigrants were now received back as the benefactors of humanity with the most distinguished marks of honour.

Viewed in this light, we find a striking similarity between the companions of the Cave and the refugees of Mecca. Whatever apparent dissimilarity was there it was due to the difference in the setting of the two occurrences, variant character and deportment of the two peoples and the distinctive teachings of the two faiths.

### **History Repeats itself**

God has ordained Islam to flourish in eternity and its votaries to survive, transmit and diffuse His message to the end of time. It is, therefore, befitting that it should pass through and confront all the situations faced by the earlier nations. Its call has

of necessity to combat the obsessions and prejudices, hatreds and the fullness of heart which always obstruct the way of righteousness. It is, therefore, no wonder that we find Islam, on different occasions, victorious and defeated, powerful and weak, acclaimed and reproached. Like the poor and persecuted followers of almost every prophet, we still see movements trying to have Islam teased and tortured, disbanded and dispersed, sometimes through administrations avowedly anti-Islamic while, on occasions, by governments styling themselves as Islamic States. The potentates of the so-called Muslim or Islamic states take pride in Islam, construct palatial mosques, solemnly commemorate the birthday of the Prophet, celebrate the *'Ids* but, along with these, they also entertain a mortal fear from the true and unalloyed faith and its practice. Strange though it may seem, these leaders consider Islam and the way of life enjoined by it, even more dangerous for their existence than the atheistic philosophies or heathen practices. Wherever such unscrupulous rulers come into power, the drama of Seven Sleepers is re-enacted in the lands of Islam: there is again an arduous struggle between the weak, small the helpless minority of devout believers and the powerful and hypocritical majority. The story of the Companions of the Cave then again yields a striking as well as needful lesson for the Muslim youths.

"Lo they were young men who believed in their Lord, and we increased them in guidance.

"And we made firm their hearts when they stood forth and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We cry unto no God beside Him, for then should we utter an enormity." (*Al-Kahf: 13-14*)

Sometimes horrifying circumstances make it difficult for a believer to choose between his life and the freedom of his conscience. A true Muslim is then left with no alternative but to withdraw from society and lead a scheduled life. Such a perilous situation may arise only occasionally once after centuries but the Prophethood of Muhammad, being the perfect and eternal guidance vouchsafed to mankind, not only identifies such dismal circumstances but also provides adequate direction to face them. The Prophet of Islam

made this prediction : "A time will soon come when the best possession of a Muslim will be his goats with which he will seek asylum in a valley or in the hills for the sake of his faith."<sup>1</sup>

These are the occasions when *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* comes to the rescue of the believer and illuminates the path he ought to tread.

We will now present the story of the companions of the Cave as recounted in the Qur'ān. Although the Qur'ān gives only an outline of the story-leaving out unnecessary and irrelevant details-but, in its own inimitable style, it displays in the most lively colours the main theme of the story in order to bring out the meaning and moral underlying it.

### Idol Worship and Licentiousness

In the days of early Christianity, Ephesus was a city of Gods celebrated for the occult arts and grosser allurements of sensuality. History bears such an irrefutable evidence of the close connection between idolatrous cults and licentiousness of frivolous dissipation as if the former depends for its existence on the connivance of the latter. If we cast our eyes over the archaeological remains of the ancient cities of India, Greece, Egypt, or the lands of the pagan Arabia we shall notice a deep gloom settled over the populace by sordid abuse of pleasure. So it also happened in Ephesus where the pagan tradition of Artemis combined with gay luxuries to debase the moral and virtuous sentiments. A grossly materialistic society thus came into existence in the centre of the empire which justified the ideals of sensual enjoyments, satisfaction of desires, immediate gain and primacy of outer, material world. The ideology soon conquered, with the help of political economic power at its command, the hearts of the populace; since, it could also offer riches, respect and authority to its votaries. Manners and morals of the ruling class, as ever fascinated the common people, and gave rise to a seemingly sophisticated yet servile class bent upon gratifying its carnal desires, achieving power and pelf and climbing to the positions of authority at every cost.

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1. *Bukhāri*, on the authority of Abū Sa'eed Khudri.



The government of the day, stern and intolerant, explicitly supported the pagan traditions and ceremonies as the common culture of the land.<sup>1</sup> It was, therefore, furiously indignant against any sect of the people which should oppose the prevalent forms of worship and moral ideals, and dub them as idolatrous and impious. It administered vindictive punishment upon those who separated themselves from the mainstream of unifying culture and traditions by taking away their rights of citizenship or imposing capital punishments on them. The opulent society of the Roman times abounded with superstitious observances and pursuits of pleasure and allowed no freedom of conscience in its bid to impress all the citizens with a common stamp. It wanted to level down all nationalities into a homogeneous lot, an unidentifiable, identical reproduction of the same culture, manner and morals.

### Courageous Believers

In an environment so luxurious but oppressive, dominated by the most imposing fabric of human government but polluted by the stains of idolatry, there were also men of upright nature who responded to the call of Jesus Christ, as soon as it reached them, with an exclusive zeal for the truth of religion and strict morality. The precepts of the gospel so powerfully captured the heart and soul of the early Christians that it became impossible for them to live without their faith. They could not barter away their beliefs for any price, not even at the cost of their lives; and therefore, they withstood every persuasion and persecution to wean them away from their modes of faith and worship.

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1. Speaking of the Roman society in the days of early Christianity, says Gibbon : "The religion of the nations was not merely a speculative doctrine professed in the schools or preached in the temples. The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing the commerce of mankind and all the offices and amusements of society."

(*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. II, p. 16)



These were the reasons which first gave rise to a deep disquiet, an inner struggle in the hearts of the Christians which manifested itself in the heroic tussle with the forces of evil. They had of necessity to chalk out a way of their own as dictated by their faith and moral precepts; directly opposed, though it was, to the demand of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Government was fervently idolatrous, and was averse to tolerate anything else than heathen cults. The society coveted every pleasure that might gratify the sensual and degrade the soul; it would not be satisfied with an enjoyment less voluptuous and surfeited. And, obviously, if any body, led by seemingly petty scruples of religious belief, dared to provide the displeasure of the government and society, it became difficult for him to win his bread.

Every ostensible consideration—the philosophical category denoting the inevitable connection between cause and effect, demands of social life, the grim facts of worldly existence—compelled one to adopt the manners and morals of the pagan society. The unerring logic of observable phenomena as well as the facts of logical reality always endorse the prevailing psychology of the masses—that one ought to ride high on the hog's back. Their arguments, as ever, are : for man cannot live without bread and bread cannot be had without money, one should seek favour of the powers that be. Respect, power and glory are concomitants of the offices of state,

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1. "Every Christian rejected with contempt", says Gibbon, "the superstitions of his family, his city, and his province. The whole body of Christian unanimously refused to hold any communion with the gods of Rome, of the empire, and of mankind. It was in vain that the oppressed believer asserted the inalienable rights of conscience and private judgement. Though this situation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the understanding, either of the philosophic or the believing part of the Pagan world. To their apprehensions it was no less a matter of surprise that any individual should entertain scruples against complying with the established mode of worship, than if they had conceived a sudden abhorrence to the manners, the dress, or the language of their native country

*"The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. II, p. 75"*

therefore, why not try to achieve these if you can. Peace and security are the essential pre-requisites of one's existence, therefore, one should purchase these even if it demands conviction in the popular traditions and beliefs of the surrounding people.

But, if there is someone who rejects with unyielding temper the persistent logic of things, the facts accepted as incontrovertible and linescapable by others, he would necessarily have his gaze fixed on certain transcendental truths beyond the reach of the senses, but divulged by the power of his pure-eyed faith. He knows that in addition to the causative apparatus in the possession of the governments and societies, there is another potent, genetic cause in the hands of the Creator of causes : the Will of God which is the original, propelling force behind the ostensible relationship of all causes and effects, grounds and consequences. Where the Will and Pleasure of God is available to furnish its support, the law of phenomenal causation becomes ineffective. The Creator of the World, the Omnipotent Lord can cause the world, time and space to change their natural course for his bondsmen whom he wants to help; create favourable situations and circumstances as he likes and bestow abundant blessings on whom He will. One need not, therefore, bend in submission to a being other than God nor espouse the cause that are themselves weak and ineffective. All one needs is a firm and unshaken faith in the Omnipotent Lord. Verily, it is the innermost conviction that moves the mountains, subdues materialistic urgings through sincere belief and annihilates the logic of reason through the logic of faith. And this is the essence and pith of the story of the Companions of the Cave.

"Lo! they were youngmen who believed in their Lord, and we increased them in guidance. And we made firm their hearts when they stood forth and said : Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. We cry unto no God beside Him, for then should we utter an enormity."

"These, our people, have chosen (other) gods beside Him though they bring no clear warrant (vouchsafed) to them. And who doth greater wrong than he who inventeth a lie concerning Allah?" (*Al-Kahf*: 13-15)

### **The Life without Faith**

But the question is how were they enabled to cling to their faith in the face of teething opposition-disowned by their native land, rejected by their government and society and denied all means of subsistence? They had no choice before them : the ghastly alternative open to them was either a life without faith or a faith without the vital flame of life and freedom of conscience.

In a situation so frightening as this, the faith came to their rescue and fortified the conviction that the earth is wide enough to provide refuge to them. They should, therefore, cut themselves adrift from all the benefits and pleasures, and pin their faith in the help of God alone.

“And when ye withdraw from them and that which they worship except Allah, then seek refuge in the Cave; your Lord will spread for you of His mercy and will prepare for you a pillow in your plight.” (*Al-Kahf* : 16)

### **The Correct Way of Migration**

It was just possible that they would have stealthily dispersed to seek a shelter in a cavern or on the summit of a hill. They would have very well lived like hermits as the degenerate Christians of the medieval ages had decided to direct the correct decision to leave their native land collectively. It was thus that they departed from the city to preserve their spiritual life. God, however, helped them to take the correct decision to leave their native land collectively. It was thus that they departed from the city to preserve their faith, religion and the mode of worship, seeking succour from God, pinning their faith in Him and confident of His relief in their distress. This was an admirable course adopted by the companions of the Cave, which, manifestly, demonstrates the way to be adopted by all believers placed in similar dreadful circumstances threatening their faith and religion.

### **The Reward of Lasting Conviction**

And what is the outcome of such a steadfast conviction? When the two preconditions of unshaken, faith and courageous

defiance of the evil are fulfilled by a believer, Divine succour descends from the clouds to render relief in his sufferings. "They were young men who believed in their Lord," says the Quaran. The reward of their unflinching belief is further described in the words of God. : "We increased them in guidance."

This was not a solitary incident, for it happens very so often. When a Muslim revolts against the grinding tyranny of an intolerant society and a government, he needs, above all, courage, patience and divine guidance. His eminent requirement at that moment is solace and peace for his smitten heart. This, by the way, also explains why God made the companions of the cave firm and resolute before the persecuting tyrant. Their agitated heart was made firm; their fear, hesitation and despair were replaced by courage, determination and confidence. These are indeed the supreme armaments ever required by the crusaders of faith who have always to struggle against irreligion and godlessness.

One more question arises here. What reward did the youths of Ephesus get for bidding farewell to their city, its delightful pleasures, their means of living and the distinguished families<sup>1</sup> they hailed from ?

The first proof of the affectionate regard by God came in the shape of a spacious and healthful cave<sup>2</sup> to which Providence guided them to take shelter. It would have been difficult for them or even by a more organised effort, to dig out such a spacious cavern in the hills in those days. The cave, although bright and airy, did not have excessive heat of the sun within it.

"And thou mightest have seen the sun when it rose move away from their cave to the right, and when it set go past them on the left, and they were in the cleft thereof."<sup>3</sup> (*Al-Kahf*: 17)

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1. Alusi writes in the *Rûh-ul-Ma'anî* that the youth belonged to the affluent and respectable families. (Vol, V, p. 11).
  2. The Arabic word used is *Kahf* denoting a spacious cave or hollow in a rock. A less spacious and small cave is known *al-maghârât* (*Lisan-ul-'Arab*).
  3. Alusi says that the youths slept well inside the cave unperturbed

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The Companions of the Cave had thus been allowed to sink into sleep in a cool and comfortable place—the most they could desire at that time of the benefits of our terrestrial world. On the other hand, their retreat to a safe shelter and the induced sleep had, for all practical purposes, linked them in communion with a world other than their own, untouched by our phenomenal causes and effects and undisturbed by our despicable despots and tyrants. This was a crowning reward from their Lord for their unflinching faith and splendid courage. The Qur'an alludes to this blessing from God in these words : "That was (one) of the portents of Allah. He whom Allah guideth, he indeed is led aright."<sup>1</sup>

The atheists and disbelievers in the overlordship of God direct their energies, knowledge and efforts to harness the forces of nature in order to make their life more pleasant often dissappointing. They find themselves afflicted with anxiety and bewilderment, confusion and misery despite the triumphs of their splendid discoveries and abundant conveniences of material prosperity. Defeated and disappointed by their own achievements, they seem to be sinking into the morass of nervous and psychological diseases, illness and lunacy, and trembling before the bewildering spectacle of the dreadful weapons threatening their own existence. The Qur'an adumbrated this truth in these words :

"And he whom He sendeth astray, for him thou wilt not find a guiding friend." (*Al-Kahf* : 17)

### **Their Spiritual Existence in the Cave**

The companions of the Cave neither lacked divine guidance in the cave nor they were doomed to inert spiritual existence. It seems that they had with them certain inscriptions (or some pages of the Old and the New Testaments<sup>2</sup>) containing prophetic guidance.

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by the sun and its heat. (Ruh-ul-Maani, Vol. p. 20) Imam Razi says that the cave opening to north would have the sun on its right when it rose, and on its left side when it set.

1. *Al-Kahf* : 17
2. The Quran speaks of the cave as well as of al-Raqeem, or the inscription. What is meant by this word the commentators differ;

(Continued on next page)

This again is a sign for all those who are forced to migrate from their hearts and homes for the sake of their faith.

When the youths had spent the provisions they had brought with them, they were lulled to deep sleep by God.

“Then we sealed up their hearing in the Cave for a number of years.” (*Al-Kahf: 11*)

### **Transformation of the Roman Empire**

The establishment of Christianity as the public religion in the entire length and breadth of the Roman Empire was an event signifying the greatest miracle among the wonders connected with the story of the Seven Sleepers. During the period of their deep slumber, miraculously prolonged, the Christian gospel is embraced and diffused in the farflung provinces of the Empire, stains of idolatry and sensual enjoyment are totally obliterated, and begin to look down upon those who once claimed the highest marks of distinction for their devoted zeal to idolatrous cults. A new way of life, having faith<sup>1</sup> in Jesus Christ, raised its head from the deep gloom of heathen cults and frivolous dissipation, which had settled upon the face of Roman society. Christianity, so long regarded as a despised lapse from faith and visited with the most frightful punishments, now inspires the people to esteem and to reward the merits of its votaries. The Seven Sleepers are thus permitted to awake after more than

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some consider it to be the stone slab placed near the mouth of the cave, on which the names of the youths were inscribed, others are of the opinion that it was the name of that town or city. Manazir Ahsan Gilani has expressed the view that these were the pages of scripture taken by them into the cave with them. a tradition related on the authority of Ibn Abbas has been quoted in *Ruh-ul-Maani* (Vol. V, p. 122). Imam Bukhari too agrees that the Raqeem was a book.

1. The emperor Constantine, the Great, who ascended the throne in 306, is believed to have embraced Christianity for that appears to have been a mixture of personal and political motives. He convened the councils of bishops to bring about uniformity in the creeds and beliefs of the Christians. He founded the city of Constantinople in 324 and died in 335.

three hundred years of deep and comfortable sleep.

"And (it is said) they tarried in their Cave three hundred years and add nine." (*Al-Kahf*: 25)

They ask each other : "How long have we slept?" But none of them being able to indicate the exact duration of their sleep, they give up the barren controversy as it is important neither for their religion nor for their worldly life.

"A speaker from among them said : How long have ye tarried? They said : we have tarried a day or some part of a day. (Others) said : Your Lord best knoweth what ye have tarried." (*Al-Kahf*: 19)

After a while, pressed by the calls of hunger, they decided that one of them should secretly return to the city to bring food for them. They hand over the coins they have to one of them to purchase the best food.<sup>1</sup>

"Now send one of you with this your silver coin unto the city, and let him see what food is purest there and bring you a supply thereof. (*Al-Kahf*: 20)

They think that the situation has still not changed and that they are still fugitives hotly pursued by the state officials. Therefore, they ask their companion to be extra-cautious as well as courteous.

"Let him be courteous and let no man know of you".

"For they, if they should come to know of you, will stone you, or turn you back to their religion; then ye will never prosper." (*Al-Kahf*: 20-21)

The people of Ephesus had still not forgotten the youths who had, in their opinion, sacrificed their lives for their religious faith. They knew how they had been sealed up in the cavern, never to come out again. The nascent Christian empire under Theodosius II, on the other hand, was inflamed by the fervent spirit of devotion to its new faith. It wanted to consecrate and glorify the sacrifices of its earlier saints and martyrs. There could, then, be no other incident

1. The best food, as explained by Imam Razi, means a pure and wholesome food. This also denotes that the wholesome food is permitted by the Shariah and is not an impediment in attaining spiritual merit.

worthy of a higher regard and noble remembrance than that of the Companions of the Cave.

### Fugitives Turn into Heroes

The youth sent to buy provisions secretly arrives in the city like a runaway slave. He wants to return to the cave as early as possible, but suddenly he finds himself and his companions in the spotlight of fame and honour.

The old-fashioned dress, obsolete language and the ancient money which the youth has with him, at once draw the attention of the people to him. The Qur'ān does not go into all these details as its purpose is not to rehearse the story but to draw its moral. The news, however, spreads like wild fire and the people, the bishop, the governor and the emperor himself, hasten to visit the cavern to have a glimpse of the sacred place. The Qur'ān, as usual, does not give the details of the profound esteem commanded by the Seven Sleepers, but expounds the lesson in no uncertain words :

“And in like manner we disclosed them (to the people of the city) that they might know that the promise of Allah is true, and that, as for the Hour, there is no doubt concerning it.” (*Al-Kahf* : 22)

The solemn revolution in the government and the populace of the Roman Empire, and the discovery of the forsaken youths of Ephesus after such a long time, signified the way God fulfils his promise and ultimately confounds the anti-God forces. The event furnished a proof that God is the Lord of the world, of time and space and can change the situation whenever he likes.

“And because the hour will come, there is no doubt thereof; and because Allah will raise those who are in the graves.”

(*Al-Hajj* : 7)

Who could have imagined that the forces of tyranny would wither away providing the most favourable circumstances for the expansion of the harassed and persecuted Christianity ? Nobody could have similarly visualised that the companions of the Cave would one day be re-discovered, youthful and beaming with a holy radiance, to confirm the Christian's faith in the resurrection of the



dead. Who know, when they were a hunted and persecuted lot, that they would again be received by their countrymen with the worshipful respect paid to the sovereigns? Was there, also, no moral in the story for the over-confident chiefs of Mecca, and no sign of hope for the weak and persecuted followers of the Prophet?

The youths of Ephesus remained alive till they had not delivered the message for which they had been roused from their deep slumber. The message delivered, they again fell asleep. Their followers would not agree on the type of memorial to be established to preserve their memory.

"When (the people of the city) disputed of their case among themselves, they said: Build over them a building; their Lord knoweth best concerning them. Those who won their point said; We verily shall build a place of worship over them."<sup>1</sup>

A basilica erected on the spot was not the only memorial of these youths. The memory of the youths was preserved with reverence and made the object of several homilies and *acta martyrum*s, and their names were honourably inscribed in the Roman, the Abyssinian and the Russian Calendar.<sup>2</sup>

"(Some) will say; they were three, their dog the fourth, and (some) say; five, their dog sixth, guessing at random; and (some) say; seven, and their dog the eighth. Say (O Muhammad):

1. "Certain persons justify construction of shrines," says Alusi in his commentary on the verse. "but it is a prohibited and sacrilegious act. *Bukhari, Muslim and Nisai* have related a tradition from Aiysha, and there is another one recorded by Muslim on the authority of Abu Huraria, which say: "My God censure the Christians the Jews who turned the graves of their prophets into places of worship". *Imam Ahmad, Bukhari, Muslim and Nisai* add that such persons would be the worst afflicted lot on the day of judgement. The verse only tells us what had then happened and does not at all justify their emulation, particularly, since we do not know if the persons referred to were pious or not. It is possible that the decision might have been taken by the king or one of his grandees (*Ruh-ul-Maani*, Vol. V. pp. 21.32)
2. Edward Gibbon: *the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. III (London, 1908), p.414.

My Lord is best aware of their number. None knoweth them save a few. So contended not concerning them except with an outward contending, and ask not any of them to pronounce' concerning them." (*Al-Kahf*: 23)

### Victory of Faith over Materialism

The first marvellous story, out of the four recounted in the chapter '*Al-Kahf*', comes to an end here. It tells us of the struggle between faith and materialism or, in other words, of the different consequences of placing one's confidence in causes, on the one hand, and in the Creator of causes, on the other. It demonstrates how faith overcomes materialism and awakens a deep and sincere conviction in the Ultimate Cause of all causes.

Those believing youths of Ephesus preferred faith over the materialistic view of life, and the promised retribution in the life-to-come over the immediate gains of this life. They opted for poverty coupled with faith rather than power and self dependent upon profane heathenism. They did not allow the gloom of idolatrous cults to tarnish their spirits and debase their sentiments even though they had to bid farewell to their native land, friends and parents and deny themselves popular admiration as well as allurements of pleasure. Instead of yielding passively to the forces of tyranny and sinful infidelity, to the licentiousness of desire and fickleness of reason, they elected to bend in submission before the worthy demands of their innermost self. Their choice was perfect and without any reservation, and the subsequent events proved that the decision taken by them was sagacious, well-considered and correct. They also demonstrated the truth that eventual success is assured to those who fear God, prefer Him over the apparent trappings of phenomenal causation and are willing to face every hardship to uphold their ennobling faith. The lesson was brought home by the indestructible faith of the companions of the cave who endured the persecutions with indomitable courage and matchless fortitude until the empire persecuting them embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a story which is repeated time and again by the unending conflict between faith and the way of life characterised as "the world" and

its terminal stages. The story of the Companions of the Cave, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that the causes and effects are subservient to the will of God, and that they have been fashioned to ultimately uphold faith and righteous action. The correct way for the believer, therefore, is to pin his faith in the omnipotence of God and to seek His blessings through unflinching conviction and righteous action.

Before going over to the parable of the owner of two gardens, the Qur'ān bids the Prophet to hold fast the rope of divine guidance and cling to unalterable faith in Him. This is the way of God, shown by the Qur'ān and illuminated by the earnest faith. It commands the Prophet to seek the companionship of those believers who manifest unfailing faith and delight in the recollection of God, even if they share an insignificant portion of the worldly riches and material possessions. It asks him to refrain from the company of such ignorant and insensible persons who, although endowed with position and rank, are denied the blessings of faith and prostration of the soul.

The Qur'ān addresses the entire humanity through the Prophet of Islam. Its message is for every believer who would ever need these solemn teachings for adopting the path of righteousness.

“Restrain thyself along with those who cry unto their Lord at morn and evening, seeking His countenance; and let not thine eyes overlook them, desiring the pomp of the life of the world; and obey not him whose heart we have made heedless of our remembrance, who followeth his own lust and whose case hath been abandoned. (*Al-Kahf* : 29)

The true believers have in every age, like the Companions of the Cave, given preference to their faith, righteous behaviour and propinquity to God over worldly gains and” material benefits. Unlike the materialists, they have ever sought inward and spiritual satisfaction even if it meant renouncing earth power, honour and riches. This is the moral drawn by *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* as well as the lesson taught by the Qur'ān.

“And strain not thine eyes toward that which we cause some wedded pairs among them to enjoy, the flower of the life

of the world, that we may try them thereby. The provision of thy Lord is better and more lasting." (*Ta-Ha* : 131)

### **Dajjāl and Materialistic Civilization**

Materialistic civilization is, in reality, the civilization of Dajjāl for it persistently opposes the spirit and the essence of the way of life demanding submission to the Creator and Master of the world. Diametrically opposed to the way of faith and worship, it issues from the base of worldly gains and rests on an unbounded admiration for the riches and comfort. Its art and literature, philosophy and thought are all impregnated with an appalling craze for the earthly goods and benefits, and punctuated with copious praise for those who hold the reins of economic and political power, it seeks to endue the objects of human desire with the qualities of eternity and omnipotence-the attributes of God-and to coerce man into a dishonourable and passive submission of his own earthly passion.

### **Extremism and Exaggeration**

The leading lights of this civilization, which is prone to over-emphasise its view and is always ready to go to the extremes, have been elegantly described in this verse of the *Sūrat-ul-kahf*.

"We have made heedless of our remembrance, who followeth his own lust and whose case hath been abandoned."

(*Al-Kahf* : 28)

The dominant traits of this civilization-reckless exaggeration, ostentatious extravagance and dire extremism-have made deep impression on its outlook and affairs as well as on the manners and morals of its votaries. Wantonly extravagant in pursuits of pleasure, sports and amusements, and extremist in social, economic and political views, these camp followers of Materialism are always overconfident absolutists no matter whether they be democrats or imperialists, socialists or communists. They cannot brook slightest deviation from the accepted norms of their philosophy or programme. They reject the conclusions which go beyond the limits of their cherished theories as diabolical and reactionary, and

dub those who claim freedom of interpreting these concepts as despicable liars, deviationists and non-conformists, worthy of ignominious contempt and barbarous punishment. One who does not fall agreeably in conformity with the peculiar concepts held by these extremists forfeits, in their eyes, the right to human dignity and respect of life, and is degraded to the level of wild beasts and reptiles deserving no charity and compassion.<sup>1</sup>

We, thus find its every affair, public or private, erring through excess and intemperance. Sobriety, moderation and restraint are foreign to its overcharged temperament.

### Bases of Revelatory Guidance

The view of life arising from prophetic teachings has equity and moderation as its two immutable bases. Speaking of the right-guided persons, the Qur'an says :

"And those who, when they spend, are neither prodigal nor grudging; and there is ever a firm station between the two."

(*Al-Furqan* : 67)

Again, the dominant characteristic of the followers of the Qur'an is stated to be their remarkable moderation :

"Thus we have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be a witness against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you." (*Al-Baqarah* : 143)

The Prophet himself afforded an illustrious example of complete and ennobling moderation.<sup>2</sup> The distinguishing feature of

1. In the United States and in many countries of Europe a new counter culture is emerging on anarchist principles. The distinguishing features of this new culture are moral irresponsibility, mutuality in sex and nudity of the younger generations, perhaps best represented by the hippies. These trends, in fact, arise from hideous excess of materialism, intellectual unrest, psychic discontent and frustration. We find almost similar conditions once prevailing in Rome and Greece. The description of the democratic youth given by Plato in his 'Republic' is not dissimilar to what obtains in our own times. For details see *Islam and the World*, pages 113-19.
2. The biographies of the Prophet of Islam and compilations of his traditions list a number of incidents showing the moderation of his

(Continued on next page)

Islam too, described as "the straight path" and "a right religion", is natural temperance and moderation and refraining from the aberrations of excess and extremism. Addressing the Prophet of Islam, says God Almighty :

"Say : Lo! As for me, my Lord hath guided me unto a straight path, a right religion, the community of Abraham, the upright, who was no idolater." (*Al-Anam* : 162)

Again, God declares :

"..... That is the right religion." (*At-Taubah* : 36)

The Qur'an directs on yet another occasion :

"So set thy purpose resolutely for the right religion

(*Ar-Rum* : 43)

The Qur'an also claims for itself the same characteristic—a clear guidance free from all crookedness. Surat-ul-Kahf begins with the assertion.

"Praise be to Allah Who hath revealed the Scripture unto his slave, and hath not placed therein any crookedness,

"(But hath made it) straight, to give warning of stern punishment from him, and to bring unto the believers who do good works the news that theirs will be a fair reward."

(*Al-Kahf* : 1-2)

The same statement is repeated here :

"A messenger from Allah, reding purified pages containing correct scriptures." (*Al-Bayyinah* : 2-3)

And, again, says God about the Qur'an :

"A Lecture in Arabic, containing no crookedness, that haply they may ward off (evil). (*Al-Zumar* : 28)

There is, thus, absolutely no doubt that the spirit of moderation and temperateness or an undeviating golden mean runs through the right path chalked out by Islam and pervades its observances, teachings, directives and the cultural pattern. It

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disposition, the restraint displayed by him in explosive situations, surcharged with emotion and the temperance of his demeanour. "He always followed the middle course," says Caliph 'Ali : "Never flatering from the right path, he always chose the easier course whenever he had two alternatives open to him." (*Shamail Tirmidhi*).

condemns the extremist tendency arising out of people's intolerant, mutually-exclusive claims which unfortunately forms the base of the modern materialistic civilization of the west from its very inception. Arising from the seed of revolt against religion and morality in Europe during the medieval ages, materialism has never displayed equilibrium. Its social philosophies exhibit desperate extremism, its thought and wisdom are strangely erratic, its manners and morals smack of reckless extravagance and it always prefers to adopt the most difficult and crooked course. It is no wonder, then, that this civilization resists all restraints; clouds and contradicts the fundamental truths; abandons simplicity and plainness; and shuns friendship and mutual respect between different peoples.

### III

## STORY OF THE OWNER OF TWO GARDENS

### Story of the Owner of two Gardens

The second story described by the Qur'an in this *Sūrah* relates to a man who owned two gardens. Most of us would have occasionally come across the situation divulged by this story. One is confronted by the bleak conditions faced by the Companions of the Cave once in a century, but the story of the owner of two gardens is enacted often enough in every place and in all ages. It is the parable of necessary comfort. He had two thriving vineyards surrounded by the groves of date palms. In between the groves he had also cultivated fields. It was all that a man of middle class could aspire for; and, indeed, he had enough to lead a happy and contented life. He might not have rolled in riches, but the middle class and the moderate standard of living have always been the touchstones of prosperity.

But the well-being of this man did not depend on his gardens alone, for all the causes and means required to raise the abundant crop had also been put into his service.

"Each of the gardens gave its fruit and withheld naught thereof. And we caused a river to gush forth therein."

(*Al-Kahf*: 34)

The owner of the groves thus thrived on account of the invisible forces working for his success and prosperity.

### Short-sightedness of the Materialistic View-point

It was at this stage that the vision of the owner of two gardens was coloured by the materialistic belief which is almost



always entertained by the ruling circles, feudal lords, national leaders, industrialists, militarists, etc. This instinctive but vigorous materialistic persuasion of the owner of the gardens was incapable of being enlightened by faith, Divine gnosis and moral discipline. He ascribed the reason for his prosperity and well-being to his own knowledge and capabilities, intelligence and industry. This was also what Korah once thought of himself.

"He said : I have been given it only on account of knowledge I possess." (*Al-Qasas* : 78)

The owner of the groves was puffed by his possessions and large following. This man, pompously exultant, wanted to mortify his friend when he said : "I am more than thee in wealth, and mightier in respect of retinue."<sup>1</sup>

The owner of the groves reaped the benefit of his bountiful crop, yet he was blissfully ignorant of his Lord, of the imperceptible causes contributing to his prosperity and the Will of God supervising his weal. Not man but the Lord and Sustainer of the World, has a just claim to the possession of whatever exists in the world. He, alone, is the connecting link between man and his possessions, nay, between his body and soul. Denial of Divine overlordship and authority is, thus, a cruel injustice to one's own self, understanding and intelligence. It is, in fact, this arrogant denial of the indwelling truth concerning the mastership of God, which evokes and fosters the materialistic outlook in man who begins to claim undisputed and eternal ownership of his possessions, riches, gardens and crops; these insidious promptings make him believe that nothing of his possessions, estate and effects shall ever be diminished or destroyed; nor, shall the Day of Judgement ever arrive to call him to account. It was, therefore, not at all surprising that the owner of the groves, foolish and unjust to his own soul as he was, thought that his crop would never wither away.

"And he went into his garden, while he (thus) wronged himself. He said: I think not that all this will ever perish.

"I think not that the Hour will ever come." (*Al-Kahf*: 36-37)

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1. *Al-Kahf* : 35.

He thought that he was one of those selected few persons who were born with a silver spoon in their mouth, whom fate never betrayed, nor doom impounded, and who always rolled in riches. He said:

"And, if indeed I am brought back unto my Lord I surely shall find better than this as a resort." (*Al-Kahf*: 37)

Persons holding such a view have a very high opinion of their own capabilities and gracious fortune. They think that they need not bother about faith and righteousness, or the moral responsibilities entailed thereby as their affluence is solely due to their merit and not because of any beneficence on the part of God.

### Religious Way of Thinking

The friend of this wayward man had been endowed with a sublime faith and was armed with the intuitive knowledge of all-embracing divine attributes. He knew that God alone is the Master and Maker of the universe, Fashioner of all causes and effects and has power to alter the situations and circumstances according to His will. He therefore came out with a reply which adumbrated the fallacy of his friend's materialistic outlook. The overlordship of God is a fundamental and incontrovertible truth but, unfortunately, it is also a fact evaded by all those conceited fellows who disbelieve in the existence of that which is beyond human perception. The very mention of the fact is distasteful to these persons.

"And his comrade, when he (thus) spake with him, exclaimed: Disbelievest thou in Him Who created thee of dust, then of a drop (of seed), and then fashioned thee a man?"

(*Al-Kahf*: 38)

One can imagine how unpalatable and annoying was such a talk to a purse-proud self-admirer. His friend, however, was a confident believer without any obsession produced by the materialistic outlook. He declared:

"But He is Allah, my Lord, and I ascribe unto My Lord no partner." (*Al-Kahf*: 39)

The owner of the gardens was then reminded by his friend of the living reality which is the pith and substance of *Sūrat-ul-*

*Kahf*. This was a truth, absolute and profound, but also sickening for the grasping spirit of the materialist. He was told that the apparent causes have no importance at all: all power belonged to the Creator and Master of all causes and effects. He was warned that the estate and effects on which he prided rested on hollow foundations; his affluence was neither brought about by the tangible, outward causes nor was it due to his own merit, intelligence or industry. It was all, in truth and reality, owing to the beneficence of the Wise, Omnipotent Lord, Who has fashioned everything in the best proportion. His attention was thus invited by his comrade toward the imperative need of restoring his faith in the omnipotence and beneficence of the Lord.

"If only, when thou enteredst thy garden, thou hadst said:  
That which Allah willeth (will come to pass) ! There is no  
strength save in Allah!" (Al-Kahf: 40)

### **The Essence of the Surat-ul-Kahf**

*'There is no strength save in Allah'* carries the essence of the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*. The Prophet of Islam and every believer reciting the Qurān has been called upon to place implicit reliance in God in every affair instead of relying on his own resources. Every intention and hope for the morrow has thus to be made dependent on the will and pleasure of God.

"And say not of anything : Lo! I shall do that tomorrow,

"Except if Allah will. And remember thy Lord when thou forgettest, and say : It may be that my Lord guideth me unto a nearer way of truth than this."

(Al-Kahf: 24-25)

One would verily not bow in submission before the outward material causes, nor rely on those who appear to possess the means nor even on his own whims, desires and caprices if he ascribes every favour to the beneficence of the Merciful Lord. *Except if Allah wills or whatsoever Allah may will* might appear to be two commonplace traditional phrases often repeated mechanically by force of habit, but these are really very significant, pithy and meaningful expressions which cut at the very root of blind faith in

one's own capacity or material resources.

### **Materialistic Outlook and Material Resources**

The materialistic outlook and the way of life arising out of it place absolute reliance on the efficacy of one's own resources and contrivances. The plans for social and economic development, regularly drawn up by the materialistic governments, proclaim from housetops the production targets that they must achieve within a given period, irrespective of the seasonal variations and the impact of natural forces.<sup>1</sup> These governments determine the exact quantum of production and the definite date by which it has to be realised; the time within which the country has to achieve self-sufficiency; or the period after which they would not have to rely on external aid; but, as we often see, natural calamities, droughts and floods foil these ambitious plans.

### **Faith in the Will of God**

*Except if God wills* is thus not an empty customary phrase repeated in daily conversation for fixing up a date or making a paltry promise. It is really a repetitive drill casting its shadow on the collective life of the entire community: it inculcates the habit to pin one's faith in the ultimate, all-embracing will of God despite all the strenuous efforts one might make to achieve the object. This directive- *And say not of anything: Lo ! I shall do that tomorrow, except if Allah will*<sup>2</sup>- is not meant for individuals alone. It is a directive to the entire community, governments, institutions and organisations of the believers demanding an implicit conviction in the dominant overlordship of God. This is, indeed, the guiding spirit of the Muslim society which draws inspiration from unflinching

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1. It does not mean that the developmental plans should not be formulated at all nor that the efforts to augment production through our increased knowledge and skill should be abandoned. What is meant here is that the increasing human knowledge and skill should not give rise to the spirit of revolt against the omnipotence of the Lord who is the Creator of all causes and effects.
  2. *Al-Kahf* : 23-24.

conviction in God and the realities beyond the ken of human perception. It also constitutes the line of demarcation between a way of life based on true faith and prophetic guidance, on the one hand, and the one arising from an outlook characterised as "this worldly," on the other.

The believing comrade of the owner of two gardens admonished his friend that adversity and prosperity, lucky break and ill fortune were not abiding or permanent features, for the Lord of the world still holds the reins of human destiny. He can turn the evil stars of a man into smiles of fortune and reduce the millionaire into a pauper in no time. Such changes are not even amazing as they continue to happen every so often. He said :

"Though thou seest me as less than thee in wealth and children,

"Yet it may be that my Lord will give me better than thy garden, and will send on it (thy garden) a bolt from heaven, and some morning it will be a smooth hillside,

"Or some morning the water thereof will be lost in the earth so that thou canst not make search for it."

(*Al-Kahf*: 40-41)

And this did happen one fine morning. A tearing gale, sent by the Lord, screamed over his groves and swept them away leaving a barren land.

"And his fruit was beset (with destruction). Then began he to wring his hands for all that he had spent upon it, when (now) it was all ruined on its trellises, and to say: Would that I had ascribed no partner to my Lord!

"And he had no troop of men to help him as against Allah, nor could he save himself.

"In this case is protection only from Allah, the True. He is Best for reward, and Best for consequence."

(*Al-Kahf*: 43-45)

### **Impiety of the Owner of the two Gardens**

The owner of the two gardens was neither a heathen nor an agnostic fellow like many other irreligious persons. Nothing in the

Qur'an indicates his godlessness; on the contrary, it appears from what is related of him that he professed faith in God. He is reported to have said:

"And if indeed I am brought back unto my Lord I surely shall find better than this as a resort." (*Al-Kahf*: 37)

Then, what was it that he regretted later on :

"Would that I had ascribed no partner to my Lord!"

(*Al-Kahf*: 43)

### Irreligiousness of the Modern Age

This is in fact the irreligiousness-associating partners with God- which is the bane of the modern materialistic civilization. It elevates natural resources, technological contrivances and professional expertise to the level of God. Man has today pinned his hope in material objects and thrown himself on the mercy of specialists and experts. For their success and failure, prosperity and adversity, honour and infamy, life and death the nations have now committed themselves to the care of one expert or the other, the arrogant spirit of extreme phenomenalism, the worshipful reverence for brute matter and physical forces and the overweening confidence in the experts, scientists and technologists are the new forms of irreligiousness. Invested with a halo which makes them partners of God, these sharers of Divinity, the new gods of modern age are the latest addition to the pantheon of myriad gods and goddesses. It is this paganism, the polytheism of yore as well as of modern times, which has been challenged by the *Surat-ul-Kahaf*.

"And coin for them the similitude of the life of the world as water which We send down from the sky, and the vegetation of the earth mingleth with it and then becometh dry twigs that the winds scatter. Allah is Able to do all things." (*Al-Kahf*: 46)

The life of the world is ephemeral. Its fleeting nature is figured by the Qur'an elsewhere too as a fading dream.

"The similitude of the life of the world is only as water which We send down from the sky, then the earth's growth of that which men and cattle eat mingleth with it till, when the earth hath taken on her ornaments and is embellished, and her

people deem that they are masters of her, Our commandment cometh by night or by day and We make it as reaped corns as if it had not flourished yesterday. Thus do We expound the revelations for people who reflect." (*Yûnus* : 25)

This is the Qur'anic view of the brief and uncertain life of the world, which is regarded as durable and imperishable by the materialists, utilitarians and epicureans. The Qur'an repudiates all those speculative and fictitious values which have led the materialists, worshippers of outer forms and objects, to regard ease and comfort as the be-all and end-all of the worldly life. The Qur'an attaches worth only to the lasting values determined by the transcendental truth embodied in the revelatory guidance.

"Wealth and children are an ornament of life of the world. But the good deeds which endure are better in thy Lord's sight for reward, and better in respect of hope." (*Al-Kahf* : 47)

### **Qur'ân and the Life of the World**

Before we proceed further let us spell out the Qur'an's view of the life of this world. Since, however, widely divergent views are advanced in this regard, it would be advisable to take cognizance of the Qur'anic statements only.

The Qur'an vehemently proclaims the transitory and perishable nature of the worldly life as well as its insignificance in comparison to the eternal life of the Hereafter. It says:

"The comfort of the life of the world is but little in the Hereafter." (*Al-Taubah* : 38)

At another place it declares :

"Know that the life of the world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry, and boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children; as the likeness of vegetation after rain, whereof the growth is pleasing to the husbandman, but afterward it drieth up and thou seest it turning yellow, then it becometh straw. And in the Hereafter there is grievous punishment, and (also) for givenness from Allah and His good pleasure, whereas the life of the world is but matter of illusion."

(*Al-Hadid* : 20)

The life of the world is but a bridge to cross over to the Hereafter of a means to test a man's qualities.

"Lo ! We have placed all that is in the earth as an ornament thereof that We may try them: which of them is best in conduct." (*Al-Kahf* : 7)

Again it says :

"Who hath created life and death that He may try you, which of you is best in conduct; and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving." (*Al-Mulk* : 2)

It holds the life of the Hereafter alone as abiding and eternal.

"Naught is the life of the world save a pastime and a sport. Better far is the abode of the Hereafter for those who keep their duty (to Allah). Have ye then no sense ?" (*Al-An'ām* : 32)

The same view is expounded in *Surat-ul-Qasas* :

"And whatsoever ye have been given is a comfort of the life of the world and an ornament thereof; and that which Allah hath is better and more lasting. Have ye then no sense?"

(*Al-Qasas* : 60)

The Qur'an severely condemns those who prefer the ephemeral, mortal and insignificant life of the world to the abiding, eternal and marvellous life in the Hereafter.

"Lo ! those who expect not the meeting with Us but desire the life of the world and feel secure therein, and those who are neglectful of Our revelations,

"Their home will be the Fire because of what they used to earn." (*Yūnus* : 8-9)

The same warning is repeated elsewhere :

"Whoso desireth the life of the world and its pomp, We shall repay them their deeds herein, and therein they will not be wronged.

"Those are they for whom is naught in the Here-after save the Fire. (All) that they contrive here is vain and (all) that are wont to do is fruitless." (*Hūd* : 15-16)

In *Surat-ul-Ibrāhīm* it says :

"And woe unto the disbelievers from an awful doom; Those who love the life of the world more than the Hereafter,



and debar (men) from the way of Allah and would have it crooked : such are far astray." (*Ibrāhīm* : 2-3)

And, again :

"They know only some appearance of the life of the world, and are heedless of the Hereafter." (*Ar-Rūm* : 7)

The Prophet is advised thus in *Surat-un-Najm* :

"Then withdraw (O Muhammad) from him who fleeth from Our remembrance and desireth but the life of the world.

"Such is their sum of knowledge. Lo ! thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth, and He is Best Aware of him who goeth right." (*An-Najm* : 29-30)

It reminds us of the short-sightedness of such persons.

"Lo ! they love fleeting life, and put behind them (the remembrance of) a grievous day." (*Al-Insān* : 27)

"Then, as for him who rebelled

And chose the life of world,

Lo ! hell will be his home." (*An-Nāziāt* : 37-39)

The Qurān lauds such persons who combine the blessings of this world with those of the next, but give preference to the Hereafter over their earthly sojourn.

"But of mankind is he who saith : 'Our Lord ! Give unto us in the world,' and he hath no portion in the Hereafter.

"And of them (also) is he who saith : 'Our Lord ! Give unto us in the world that which is good and in the Hereafter that which is good, and guard us from the doom of Fire.'":

(*Al-Baqarah* : 200-201)

It quotes the prayer offered by the Prophet Moses :

"And ordain for us in this world that which is good, and in the Hereafter (that which is good)." (*Al-Arāf* : 156)

Praising Abraham, the Qurān quotes God as saying :

"And We gave him good in the world, and in the Hereafter he is among the righteous." (*An-Nahl* : 122)

### **Revelatory and Materialistic Views of Life**

The view of life and the world enunciated by the prophetic teachings or the revelatory guidance vouchsafed to man is diametrically opposed to that put forth by the materialistic outlook

which assigns supreme importance to the terrestrial life, and the constant aim of whose endeavours is to achieve worldly power, glory, wealth, position, comfort, and all that can gratify man's longings and appetites.

The sayings of the blessed prophet clearly expound the Qurānic view of life. The Prophet often used to say :

"O Allah, life is only that of the Hereafter." <sup>1</sup>

He used to beseech God :

"O Allah, provide for the progeny of Muhammad only that which is essential." <sup>2</sup>

Mustaurad ibn Shaddād relates that he heard the Prophet saying :

"By God, the life of the world in comparison to Hereafter is no more than the water left on a finger dipped in the ocean." <sup>3</sup>

The life of the Prophet was the ideal embodiment of his teachings and the outlook of life arising therefrom. Ibn Masūd relates that once he saw the Prophet lying on a mat, whose marks were visible on his body. He said :

"If you permit, I may spread something on it."

"What have I to do with the world," replied the Prophet, "for me it is like a shady tree under which a traveller takes rest for a while and then leaves on his errand." <sup>4</sup>

In a Tradition, Caliph 'Umar narrates :

"I once went to the Prophet when he was lying on a mat without a bedding or a bed-sheet. The pillow on which he was leaning was made of leather stuffed with straw, and the crossed pattern of the matting could easily be seen imprinted on his body. I saluted the Prophet.....I cast a glance over the house. By God there was nothing which I saw except three pieces of leather. I said, 'O Prophet, Pray God to bless your followers with abundance. The Persians and the Romans have been

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1. *Sahih Bukhāri : Kitāb-ur-Raqāq*
  2. *Sahih Muslim : Kitāb-uz-Zuhd*
  3. *Sahih Muslim*
  4. *Ahmad, Tirmidhi and Ibn Mājah*

favoured with all the pleasures of the world, although they believe not in Allah !' Starled to hear this, the Prophet got up and said, 'Ibn Khattāb, you too think like this ! These are the fellows who have got all their rewards in the comforts of this world alone.'<sup>1</sup>

### Behaviour of the Prophet's Companions

The care of Hereafter got enshrined in the heart of those who had the good fortune of being put through the grind of prophetic guidance. It became the cynosure of their eyes, their greatest yearning and the culmination of their pious desires. They were never negligent of its demands for a moment, nor were they willing to accept anything in its place. In order to have a glimpse of the spirit of the "*other-worldliness*", the outlook and the bent of mind common to all the companions of the Prophet of Islam, it would suffice to have a look at the character and demeanour of Caliph 'Alī. His life was a striking example of the piety, simplicity, godliness, and other sterling qualities produced by the benevolent care of the Prophet in his followers and companions.

Abū Saleh has given a graphic description of Caliph 'Alī's character. He says that once Caliph Mu'awiyah asked Dharar ibn Dhamurah, a companion of Caliph 'Alī ibn Abi Talib to narrate something about the latter. Dharar first asked to be excused but when Caliph Mu'awiyah insisted on it, he said :

"All right, then listen to me. He ('Alī) was far-sighted and strong and possessed a robust health. He always spoke what was true and dispensed impartial justice. He was like a fountain of knowledge or a repository of wisdom. Being always scared of the world and its pleasures, the night and its darkness were pleasing to him. By God, his eyes were more often brimming with tears and he always appeared to be care-worn. He liked to wear garments made of rough cloth and to partake coarse food, lived like a commoner and made no distinction between himself and other. Whenever we asked him anything, he would

reply; whenever we went to him, he would salute first; and whenever we invited him, he would come ungrudgingly; but despite his nearness, his awe never permitted us to talk in his presence or join in his conversation. He respected the pious and loved the poor; the powerful could never hope to achieve any undeserved gain from him; nor the weak ever gave up hope of obtaining justice from him. By God, I have seen him often after the night-fall standing on his prayer-mat, holding his beard and weeping as if he were bitten by a snake. Often in the dead of night, he could be heard asking the world to leave him high and dry and to give up all hopes of enticing him away to its pleasures. I could still visualise him saying thus : 'O World, thy pleasures are transitory, thy life short, thy allurements unreliable and dangerous while I have to cover an arduous, long and extremely perillous path.'<sup>1</sup>

Now, here is another example reflecting the spirit of the same philosophy of life. It is an extract from the address delivered by a companion of the Prophet in the then metropolis of Islam.

Khalid ibn 'Umar al-'Udwi relates that 'Utbah ibn Ghazwān, the then governor of Basrah, addressed a congregation as follows :

"Verily, the world is nearing its end; running out fast to its doom, it has now only a few drops of nectar in its cup to offer you. You are about to migrate to a place where you would have to live forever ; therefore, set out for it with the provisions of virtue and goodness. We have been told that a stone would be thrown in the Hell but it would not reach its bottom even in seventy years, and by God, this spacious place of torment would ultimately be filled with the wrong-doers. Do you have any doubt about it ? We have been told that the two corners of the Heaven's threshold would lie at a distance of forty years' journey, but it would too be overcrowded one day. I still remember the days when we had nothing to eat except leaves of the trees for weeks together, and our mouths used to bleed because of it. Once I got a bed-sheet which I had to

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1. Ibn-i-Jawzi : *Sifat-us-Safwah*, Hyderabad, 1935 Vol. I, p.122

divide into two, one for myself and other I gave to Sa'eed ibn Mālik. Now, every one of us is a governor of one city or the other, but I seek refuge in God from assigning any merit to my own self while I am really insignificant in the eyes of Lord." <sup>1</sup>

### Modern Apologists of the Hereafter

All those persons who are not inspired by the prophetic teachings nor are endowed with a sincere faith, find it difficult to accept the life-after-death, the Day of Judgement and Retribution with a deep conviction. On the contrary, shaken by the very concept of after-life, their interest in it, if any, is always distracted and desultory ; they actually lack the warmth of heart for the life after death which is a distinguishing feature of the followers of the prophets and revealed guidance. Such persons are, by nature, apologists and escapists, who always try to explain away the life-to-come through subtle sophistry. They look upon the concept of Hereafter as a figurative expression meant for the bygone days of primitive intelligence when it was designed to win over conviction of the believers as an expedient for righteous action. But, it is a fact, striking and incontrovertible, that the Qur'ān and its teachings and the life of the Prophet of Islam are permeated with the spirit of life-after-death. This is the mind that the prophetic guidance seeks to build in its followers. We, therefore, find this distinctive inclination, this bent of mind and predisposition in all truly Islamic societies which are brought up in accordance with the teachings of Islam and kept free from extraneous contaminations. Showing least concern for the worldly pleasures and possessions, pleasantly temperate in behaviour, anxious for the Hereafter and ultimate sequel, commending piety and virtue, preferring that which is promised in the after-life over earthly power and pelf, overflowing with the desire to court death and meet their Lord—such are the distinctive characteristics of the true believers whose eagerness for propinquity to God often finds expression in the solemn yearning of Bilāl : "Tomorrow shall I meet my favourites and friends :

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1. *Sahih Muslim; Vol.II, Kitāb-uz-Zuhd*

Muhammad, on whom be peace and blessings of God, and his companions. " 1

### **Prophetic Call and Reformatory Movements**

There are also revivalist and reformatory movements which expound the concept of Hereafter, its underlying wisdom, the benefits flowing from it and the invaluable contribution of the concept in establishing a stable society imbued with the sense of moral responsibility, but, evidently, the philosophy of after-life is employed by them only as a means of educating the people and impressing upon them the spiritual-moral view of life preached by Islam. There is no denying the fact that their endeavour is praiseworthy, for one cannot have a congenial, orderly and ethical society without inculcating the belief in the Hereafter. At the same time, however, the method adopted by these movements is quite different from the way of thought, procedure of reform and the behaviour and deportment of the prophets and their followers. The methodology of reform evolved by the apostles of God is inspired by an unflinching faith and sincere conviction, a heart-felt sentence and fervid enthusiasm : it is a living faith which encompasses the entire being of the believer. The reformist movements, on the other hand, are simply an external, outward expression of these deep-seated emotions of faith. The discourses of the former on sequel and life-after-death are marked by their instinctive conviction, glowing ardour, passionate eagerness, impressive earnestness and delicious ecstasy while the latter promote the idea as an expedient to social and moral reform of their people in order to build up a coherent, stable and ethical society. The difference between logical disputations and the secret springs of conviction, and the results achieved by the two, are too well known to be discussed here to explain the difference between the two.

### **The Mainspring of Courage and Zeal**

The unshakable belief of the Prophet of Islam and his companions in the life-after-death and the preference accorded by

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1. *Ihyā ul-'Uloom*, on the authority of Ibn Abī-ad-Dunya.

them to the after-life over the earthly pleasures of the world, did neither induce them to cut themselves adrift from the mainstream of life nor to relinquish its leadership. It never occurred to them that they should give up their means of livelihood or abandon their struggle for faith, justice, and righteousness. Their faith was not a product of disheartened defeatism, as we find today among certain people. It was, on the contrary, the fountainhead of valour and courage which inspired them to fight evil until virtue and goodness were victorious. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that those who were the most virtuous had the most intense conviction in God and in the after-life, despised the earthly pleasures and intensely desired closeness to God in the Hereafter, and were also the most courageous, brave and valiant fighters in the way of God. Their's was, in fact, the greatest contribution in the lightning success of Islam in its early phases.

Disdainfulness of earthly possessions and pleasures, self-restraint over one's longings and passions, valiant and courageous defiance of the evil, and similar other ennobling qualities are the end-product of conviction in the eternal life-after-death. The conquests achieved by the sword-arm of Islam as also the diffusion of faith in the far-off lands by the serene preachers of faith owed their success to the firm conviction in the resurrection and retribution in the life-after-death.

### **Monasticism and the Belief in Hereafter**

The belief in the Hereafter, as expounded by the Qur'an, has hardly anything to do with the rightly despised monastic life, celibacy and asceticism. The latter has been condemned by the Qur'an too, although it gained ground among the Muslims later on to a certain extent, owing to their negligence of the Islamic teachings and the inter-action of extraneous influences of Christianity, Buddhism, Brahmanism and neo-Platonism.

The belief in the Hereafter commends deliberate choice of the after-life without denying or denigrating the just and inescapable demands of our earthly life. It encourages us to engage in an unending contest for the victory of righteousness, to sacrifice

our fleeting desires for the eternal life-to-come and to lay down our lives in the way of our Lord and Master. There is not the least doubt that the Muslims have been rendered weak solely because of the weakening of their conviction in the Hereafter. The younger generations of the Muslims today, who are the unhappy victims of their own longings and desires, need the healing faith in the after-life, more than anyone else, to recover their lost vitality. The Muslims will not regain their strength again, nor will their faith be complete, until they endorse the Qur'anic philosophy of life ; but this is the view of life and the world violently opposed by the modern materialistic outlook. On the other hand all those persons who have been enchanted by the materialistic view-point, would not agree to anything short of wordly ease and comfort, fulfilment of their base desires, power, position and glory in the transitory life of the world.

*Surat-ul Kahf* exposes the weakness of the materialistic outlook on life and brings the hollowness of the view endorsed by its votaries to a constant and bitter reproach. it presents life in its true perspective ; no matter, whether certain people like it or not.



## IV

**STORY OF MOSES  
AND KHIDHR****The Story of Moses and Khidhr**

Now we turn the story of Moses and Khidhr. It is in reality the story of our everyday life wherein we often come across paradoxical situations which draw our attention to the fact that there are still a number of inexplicable things beyond the sphere of our knowledge. These incidents tell us that howsoever learned a man may be, his decisions, estimates and opinions formed on the basis of his knowledge and experiences sometimes go astray. If the secrets of life were, somehow, made known to someone, we would undoubtedly find a visible change in his ideas, modes of thought and decisions. The episode in the story of Moses is also meant to illustrate the point that one can never be dead sure of the opinions formed or the impressions gained or else the stand taken on the basis of ephemeral knowledge. It demonstrates that it is rather impossible for human knowledge to comprehend and cover the totality of universal knowledge and, therefore, one should not be hasty in arriving at a conclusion nor should one insist on the acceptance of his opinions and impressions by others. Life is itself a parable—secretive, variable and uncertain. The universe is too wide and incomprehensible, its secrets and complexities stand out clearly from the external and outer realities. These present us with paradoxes which cannot be solved by man despite his constant quest for knowledge. In fact, there are numerous mysteries of nature which we might never be able to unravel with all the scientific inventions and discoveries at our command. Even in our mundane life, day-to-day affairs, we are confronted with many a complex situation created

by our mistakes, half-baked ideas, hasty decisions and immature and emotional behaviours. Now, if man were to be entrusted with the governance of this vast and complex universe, with a free hand to do whatever he likes, he would soon make it brimming with strife and trouble, and take it to the brink of total destruction. This would be simply because of his limited knowledge and sphere of action, which are, unfortunately, also conditioned by his predisposition to hasty action.

In order to demonstrate the limitation of human knowledge, which also forms the basis for faith in the unseen realities, God selected one of the greatest prophets, Moses, who had been endowed with knowledge, virtue and piety. Moses once stood preaching to his people, when he was asked whether he knew of a man who was wiser than him. Moses answered in the negative. Not pleased by the reply of Moses, who ought to have ascribed his knowledge to God alone, he was directed to meet a man more knowing than himself at a place where the two seas met.<sup>1</sup>

### Strange and Bewildering Events

Moses set out on the journey with a companion to find out the man who had been endowed with a special knowledge not granted to ordinary mortals. We would presently see that the special knowledge granted to this Man of God did come into conflict with the human knowledge based on experiences and apparent situations.

Khidhr boards a boat whose owner does not charge the fare from him, but, on reaching his destination, Khidhr knocks out a few of her planks. Moses, not understanding the import of Khidhr's rebukes and asks him to explain what he has done. Next, Khidhr kills an innocent youth who had not put him to any harm nor had his parents apparently been a source of anxiety to him. Then, again, Khidhr helps in the repair of a dilapidated wall although the inhabitants of the place had been inhospitable to him. These were undoubtedly strange and weird happenings which were raising a storm of curiosity in the heart of Moses. These inexplicable events,

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1. *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. III; *Kitab ut-Tafsir*.

naturally, prompted him to ask Khidhr to explain why had he scuttled the boat which had taken them to the shores safely. It ought to have been protected and not broken. The owner of the boat, too, deserved thanks from Khidhr rather than his enmity. The innocent boy ought to have been received with kindness and looked after instead of being put to death. Similarly, the inhabitants of the village who had been so unkind and unsocial were entitled to a stern behaviour. Khidhr, however, appears to be taking decisions neither commended by wisdom and known facts nor warranted by emotions and instincts. Moses, was, after all, a prophet of God, endowed with faith and a kind heart, and therefore he could not stand the flagrant acts of injustice committed by his comrade. He forgot the promise made by him, at the start of the journey, to ask no question about anything until Khidhr himself explained it to him, and exclaimed :

"Verily thou hast done a horrid thing." (*Al-Kahf*: 74)

Khidhr gives no reply to the questions raised by Moses and goes on to complete the mission for which they had undertook the journey. At last, having arrived at their destination, Khidhr uncovers the mysteries which Moses was finding inexplicable and bewildering. Anyone who goes through the Qur'ān would see that Khidhr was right. Whatever he did was not only correct and logical in the given circumstances but it also unfolded practical wisdom. He did not take a wrong decision on any of the three occasions. He took out a plank or two from the boat to make it unseaworthy and thus saved it from seizure. The fact was that the unjust king of that land seized on every boat he could get in a serviceable condition. The owner of the boat had not charged any fare from Khidhr and the latter repaid the courtesy of the boatman by saving his boat from seizure.

The boy slain by Khidhr was to become a source of grief and danger to the faith of his parents. He would have grown as an infidel and led his parents to renounce their faith out of their excessive fondness for him. Khidhr thought it preferable that the parents of the boy should better come to grief on account of the boy's death in this life rather than suffer eternal torments of the Hereafter. Another son could be had if one expired, but nothing but eternal fire could

be had after renouncing one's faith and dying an infidel's death.

"And as for the lad, his parents were believers and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief.

'And we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in purity and nearer to mercy."

(*Al-Kahf*: 81-82)

The wall was in a ruinous state. if it had fallen, the treasure concealed beneath it and owned by two orphan boys, would have been exposed. It would have then been despoiled by the selfish people of the town and the orphan boys would not have got anything of their rightful patrimony. This also illustrates that virtuous action benefits a man after his death as much as during his lifetime. Obviously, if God does not like to ignore the progeny of a righteous man after his death, He would certainly not forsake one who is upright and guiltless.

"Allah loseth not the wages of the kindly." (*Yusuf*: 90)

"And their Lord hath heard them (and He saith) :

Lo ! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost." (*Aal-i-'Imrān* : 195)

Verily, Allah gives a fair return of whatever we do.

"And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father had been righteous, and thy Lord intended that they should come to their full strength and should bring forth their treasure as a mercy from their Lord ; and I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation of that wherewith thou couldst not bear." (*Al-Kahf*:83)

### Limitations of Human Knowledge

The realities of things are very often so different from what they appear to us according to our imperfect lights. And, how much the interior of a thing differs from its exterior; the outer from the inside reality ; how incomprehensible and enigmatic are the mysteries of the Universe ; but man is hotheaded enough to claim that his knowledge compasses all, the secrets of man as well as of universe, down to their core and inner-most realities.

At first sight Khidhr appeared to be away from apparent realities and his actions wore the look of meaningless moves. But, to the end of the chapter, we find him more realistic and acting more wisely. The story illustrates that life is ever on the move, presenting us with situations and new realities in every age from its inexhaustible store of secrets and mysteries. The episode also elucidates that knowledge is limitless, beyond the scope of human comprehension.

".....and over every word of knowledge there is one more knowing." (*Yūsuf*: 76)

### A Challenge to Materialistic Outlook

The story narrated here is a challenge to the materialistic way of thought. Materialism claims that life is not an iota more than what it explains; it possesses the secrets of the nature and universe ; only that is to be believed which is tangible and capable of being comprehended by human perception; that which is perceptible is real and the rest is non-existent, visionary and baseless; and, finally, that man is the rightful owner and master of this world. Materialism elevates man to the position of lawgiver, claims perfection for human knowledge and assumes that nothing in this vast and complex universe is beyond human comprehension.

These have always been the fundamental pastulates of materialistic thought, and so it is today also. The *Sūrat-ul-Kahf* in general, and the episode of Moses in particular, strikes at the root of materialistic categories of thought. The story concludes with these words of Khidhr :

"Such is the interpretation of that wherewith thou couldst not bear." (*Al-Kahf*: 83)

*Interpretation* signifies, in the phraseology of the Qur'ān, the explanation of a reality. <sup>1</sup> Man is always predisposed to commit mistakes, take hasty decisions and rashly deny the existence of a reality; but when he is confronted with truth and stubborn facts, he has ultimately to accept the realities of the situation.

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1. Vide Commentary of *Sūrah Ikhlās* by Ibn Taimiyah.

The fourth and the last story narrated in the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, relates to a man who had not only been favoured with a solemn faith but had also at his command power and glory, stupendous assets and natural resources. This man directed his energies to humble the cruel tyrants of his day for the benefit of suffering humanity and to establish a just, humane and civilized order of society.

# ZUL-QARNAIN

## Identification of Zul-Qarnain

The commentators of the Qur'ān hold divergent opinions about Zul-Qarnain. A large number of them suppose the person to be Alexander the Great. Imām Rāzī is of the same view along with the majority of commentators, but actually there is no valid reason to accept this opinion. Alexander the Great lacked most of those characteristics and achievements of Zul-Qarnain which have been expressly mentioned in the Qur'ān, as, e. g. faith in the One and Only God, piety, just treatment to the conquered people and the erection of an iron rampart. Perhaps the identification of Zul-Qarnain with Alexander the Great was due to imperfect details of his character and exploits being available to the earlier commentators of the Qur'ān.

There are, however, other doctors of faith who identify Zul-Qarnain with the Iranian Emperor Cyrus who was known to the Jews as the Redeemer of Israel, and to the Arabs by the name of Kai Khusroe.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This is the view put forth in some detail by Maulānā Abul Kalām Azād in Volume II of the *Tarjumān-ul Qur'ān*, wherein he has adduced numerous references from historical treatises and Jewish religious records in support of his thesis. A summary of it is given here.

A remarkable personality came to the fore in a dramatic manner in 559 B. C. and soon attracted the attention of the whole world. Persia was then divided into two kingdoms : the southern part was known as Persia and the north western portion was called Media (Arabs called it Mahat). Cyrus welded the Persian tribes into a single nation by defeating Astyages of Media at Pasargadæ.

*Continued on next page*

But the view expressed by Saiyid Qutub in *Fī Zalāl il Qur'ān*, which is being reproduced here, appears to us more logical than the explanations given by other commentators.

' The Qur'ān does not specify the identity or the time and place Zul-Qarnain. This is a style of narration peculiar to the stories mentioned in the Qur'ān, for its aim is not to historicise the events but to draw out the moral and lesson of the story. The purpose can very often be achieved without determining the location and chronology of the events mentioned in the Qur'ān.

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Thereafter began the conquests of Cyrus, which were marked not by sanguine battles and cruelties but by humanity and mildness to the vanquished inhabitants and honour to the defeated monarchs. Within 12 years all the lands from Black Sea to Bactria had been reduced to the position of Persian dependencies.

In the spring of 546 B.C. Croesus of Lydia attacked Persia, Cyrus flung himself upon him, beat him at Pteria in Cappadocia and pursued him to Lydia, the North-Western part of Asia Minor, which was then the centre of Hellenistic civilization in Asia.

A second victory followed on the banks of Pactolus : by the autumn of 546. Sardis had already fallen, and the Persian forces advanced at the bound of Mediterranean. During the next few years the Greek littoral towns were reduced. In 539 B. C. Nabonidus was defeated and Babylon occupied, which with the Chaldean empire, Syria and Palestine also became Persian.

When Cyrus would have advanced beyond Sardis he must have turned back from the coast of Ægean Sea, near Smyrna. Here he would have seen the sea taking the shape of a lake and the sun setting in the murky water : "he found it setting in a muddy spring," as the Qur'ān puts it (xviii : 87).

In his eastward expedition, Cyrus conquered the lands upto Makran and Balkh. In this region he subdued the uncivilized nomadic tribes, which have also been referred to in the Qur'ān : "he found it (sun) raising on a people for whom We had appointed no shelter therefrom (xviii : 91)" After reducing Babylon, Cyrus rescued the Jews from the tyranny of Nabonidus, as predicted in the Jewish Scriptures. He permitted the Jews in Babylon, to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

*Continued on next page*



"Our recorded history does mention an emperor by the name of Alexander Zul-Qurnain <sup>1</sup> but it is certain that he was not the the personality meant by the Qur'ān. Alexander the great was a polytheist and an idol worshipper while the sovereign mentioned in the Qur'ān was a man of God, a unitarian, having faith in the Day of Judgement, Resurrection, etc.

"In his book entitled *Al-Athār-ul- Baqiyah an-al-Quroon il-Khāliyah* Abū Raihan al-Bairuni writes that Zul-Qarnain spoken of in the Qur'ān belonged to Hymar, <sup>2</sup> as the name itself indicates. The kings of Hymar had Zū as an essential part of their names as, e.g., Zū-Nuwās, Zū-Yazān. The proper name of Zul-Qarnain was Abū Bakr ibn Afriqash. He subdued all the lands on the coast of Mediterranean Sea, including Tunis and Morocco, and founded a city called Afriqiah which gave its name to the entire continent. He was called by the name of Zul-Qurnain as he was believed to have reached the lands of rising and setting sun.

"This view might be correct but we have no means to verify it. the extant records of history hardly contain anything about him, and the description of his character and conquests given in the Qur'ān is too general like that of the peoples of Noah,

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The last campaign of Cyrus was in the direction of the lands despoiled by the people called Gog and Magog. Cyrus advanced towards Caucasus, leaving Caspian Sea to his right, where he came across a mountain pass between two steep hills rising like walls. Here he constructed the iron rampart to check the ingress of Gog and Magog.

Cyrus met his end in 529 B.C. A marble statue with two horns on his head, signifying the unified kingdoms of Persia and Media, was recovered from the ruins of Pasargadæ in 1938. The unification of these two kingdoms gave Cyrus the title of Zul-Qarnain. Cyrus has been rightly praised by most of the modern historians for his conquests as well as for his just and mild treatment of the conquered people (For further details see *Universal History of the World*, Vol. II, by J. A. Hammerton).

1. Literally " The two-horned" one
2. An ancient South Arabian people

Hüd, Sâlih, etc. Actually the records preserved by our history constitute only a fraction of our life-story on this earth. We have no record of the events that took place before history began to list them. Its verdict is thus not at all reliable.

"If only the Old Testament could have been preserved in its pristine purity without interpolations and additions, it could have served as a valuable source of history. But, unfortunately, numerous legends have been introduced and interwoven with the revelation contained in this Scripture with the result that the historical events mentioned in it cannot be relied upon.

"The Qur'ân being free from all additions, alterations and mutilations can, undoubtedly, be a trustworthy source of the events narrated by it, but its version cannot, obviously, be verified from the historical records. The is so because of two reasons; first, the history does not account for innumerable happenings; and, secondly, the Qur'ân unfolds some of those events of the olden times which have not been recorded at all.

"There is another reason too. Recorded history, even if it contains the details of any particular happening, is, after all, a human endeavour always likely to commit mistakes or misrepresent the event in question. With all the facilities of communications, means of transmitting news and the techniques of their verification in the modern times, we sometimes come across different versions of one and the same story. The same event is not unoften interpreted differently, viewed from different angles and widely differing conclusions are drawn therefrom. This is, in truth, the basic material which serves as the source of history : it is, however, an entirely different matter that we devise elaborate norms for post-scrutiny and verification of the authenticity of the material so collected.

"Therefore, it is against the accepted principles of literary criticism as well as Quranic exegesis to seek historical evidence for the verification of events related by the Qur'ân. Moreover, this procedure is also not in accord with the conviction which claims to profess the Qur'ân as eternal, unchangeable word of

God. Absolute reliance cannot, obviously, be placed on the date thus collected by history either by one having faith in the revelatory nature of the Qur'ān or by an impartial literary critic. Historical data is, at best, no more than a collection of our impressions, estimates and ideas about the past happenings.

"The Prophet had been asked about Zul-Qarnain. Thereupon God revealed certain salient characteristics of the monarch known by that name. now, the Qur'ān being the only source of knowledge about him, the verification of its historicity or otherwise is beyond our means. The commentaries on the Qur'ān present differing views in the matter and, therefore, reliance cannot be placed on them. If any particular view is cautious for numerous traditions of yore and Israelite legends have found their way into some of the old commentaries" <sup>1</sup>

It hardly makes any difference to a student of the Qur'ān whether he is able to identify Zul-Qarnain with any sovereign in the light of available historical records or not. It should be sufficient for him that the Qur'ān has indicated the dominant characteristics of Zul-Qarnain. We know that he was endowed with political and military power, manifold resources, courage, large heartedness and nobility of character.

"Verily We ! We established him in the earth, and vouchsafed unto him of everything a way (to attain anything he desired).

"Then he followed a way." (*Al-Kahf*: 84-85)

### Conquests of Zul-Qarnain

The conquests of Zul-Qarnain were quite extensive. His campaigns were directed to far-off lands in the eastern and western directions which have been alluded to in the Qur'ān as the rising place and the setting place of the sun. He conducted his wars with great humanity, administered his subjects mildly, looked after the weak and poor with loving care and dealt with the insolent and the bully in a stringent manner. The organisation of his empire was planned throughout on the lines indicated by the Qur'ān.

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1. *Fi Zalāl il-Qur'ān*, Volume VI (V Edition) pp. 8-10

"He said : As for him who doeth wrong, we shall punish him, and then he will be brought back unto his Lord, Who will punish him with awful punishment !

"But as for him who believeth and doeth right, good will be his reward, and We shall speak unto him a mild command."

(*Al-Kahf* : 88-89)

Mark the distinctive features of the state policy indicated by Zul-Qarnain : it speaks volumes of his judiciousness, moderation and sagacity as well as nobility of character.

During his campaigns Zul-Qarnain found a people settled between two hills who were continuously harassed and attacked by the nomadic tribes from across the hills. The Qur'ān as well as other scriptures name these tribes as Yājūj and Mājūj (Gog and Magog).<sup>1</sup>

The turbulent tribes continuously raided and plundered the land of the other nation.

"And on that day We shall let some of them surge against others." (*Al-Kahf* : 100)

### Construction of the Iron Rampart

For the weak but peace-loving nation the arrival of Zul-Qarnain was a God-send opportunity. They requested the mighty

1. We entirely agree with the view, reproduced here, expressed by Saiyid Qutub.

"We cannot definitely indicate the location of the two hills between which Zul-Qarnain had passed through, nor do we know anything else about this place. It appears from the Qur'ān that it was a vally between two mountains where had settled a backward and weak people who could not understand the language spoken by Zul-Qarnain (*Fi Zalāl il-Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, p. 23)

So far as the matters relating to the identification of God and Magog, the destruction of the rampart holding them in check and their pouring forth from their land to plunder and ruin the earth are concerned, one can find lengthy details in the commentaries of the Qur'ān and the Tradition, particularly those relating to the advent of the Doomsday. All this material, although by no means extensive needs careful study and re-interpretation by some one sincerely interested in the task.

emperor to protect them from the depredation of the wild and turbulent tribes by erecting a barrier between them and their enemies. They even expressed their willingness to purchase immunity by contributing their mite towards construction of the barrier.

Zul-Qarnain accepted their request to get the barrier constructed but unlike most of the greedy rulers he did not do so to augment his treasure but to protect his subjects. He did not, therefore, impose too heavy a taxation to meet the cost of proposed construction, but simply required them to provide available labour and material.

"He said : That wherein my Lord hath established me is better (than your tribute). Do but help me with strength (of men), I will set between you and them a bank. Give me pieces of iron....." (*Al-Kahf* : 96-97)

Zul-Qarnain provided the motive force and the organising skill while the local population helped with men and material for the construction of the barrier.

".....till, when he had levelled up (the gap) between the cliffs, he said : Blow !-till, when he had made it a fire, he said: Bring me molten copper to pour thereon." (*Al-Kahf* : 97)

At last the barrier was completed which afforded protection to that nation against the incursions of the nomads.

"And (Gog and Magog) were not able to surmount, nor could they pierce (it)." (*Al-Kahf* : 98)

### **Wisdom Vouchsafed to the Believers**

Zul-Qarnain was a mighty emperor and the victor of nations, but his conquests never filled him with conceit. He never said : *I have been given it only on account of knowledge I possess*;<sup>1</sup> on the contrary, he ascribed his achievements to God. He did not even brag of the impreg nability of the barrier constructed by him. Like a true believer in God and the Hereafter he laid more stress on the help and grace of God.

"He said : This is a mercy from my Lord; but when the promise of my Lord cometh to pass, He will lay it low, for the

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1. *Al-Qasas* : 78

promise of my Lord is true. " (*Al-Kahf*: 99)

And this is the attitude of a true believer and a man of God. He never forgets his Lord-not even when he is crowned with the most brilliant victories nor when he gains control over gigantic resources and the sinews of earthly power. He turns his attention to God in the hour of triumphant success and remembers the ultimate end, when he would crumble into dust and be raised again: he fearfully trembles with the awe of God; acknowledges his own weakness; offers solace and mercy to the suffering humanity; preserves truth and justice; and, directs his incessant endeavour to serve his fellow-beings, creates a just and virtuous social order, brings out the ignorant from the dark alley of godlessness nad crass materialism to the sunshine of divine light and natural religion. This was the noble and virtuous path trodden by Solomon and Zul-Qarnain, by the right-guided Caliphs and impeccable leaders of Islam during their own times in different parts of the world.



## VI

**THE FALLACY OF  
MATERIALISM****Revolt against the Lord and Creator**

It has been, indeed, one of the greatest misfortunes of the world as well as of the humanity that the modern western cultural impulses and ideas took shape at a time when the revolt against religion, in general, and against the realities beyond the ken of human perception, in particular, had already captured the minds and hearts of the Christian nations. The Western civilization was born and brought up amongst the nations which had entrenched themselves against a priestly order exploiting religion for the sake of its base desires and selfish ends. Uncompromising opposition to the worldly knowledge by the Christian Church which had set face against the improvent of the condition of the earthly life, coupled with the immorality, fanaticism and ignorance of the Church fathers forced the people in the West to take a materialistic bias to the endeavours concerning intellectual and cultural development, industrial progress and social growth of these nations. As this lop-sided development increased, it decreased, in balance, the spiritual relationship between man and his Creator. All these consequences were, it would be seen, the product of inborn tendencies, temperaments, peculiar circumstances and the social and religious order of the European peoples. This new civilization was thus born and brought up in an atmosphere surcharged with atheistic and amoral tendencies. Phenomenal progress in the fields of physical sciences, industry and technology, of the other hand, enabled man to conquer the space and set his foot on the moon.

The ever-increasing material progress, control over the



forces of nature and the dynamic expansion of human potentialities promising ultimate mastership over the universe has, in consequence, given rise to an anti-God materialism, which has become the champion of anti-religious thought and action. It has become the distinctive mark and the dominant characteristic of the modern materialistic civilization. We do not know of any other civilization so ruthlessly materialistic and at the same time so thoroughly God-opposing, hostile to everything divine in origin or religious in principle and method, craving for material power and pleasure, and claiming an unquestioning submission to its own impulses and ideas.

### **Culmination of the Materialistic Civilization**

We have just stated that the Western civilization has amassed immense material power and resources but it is also God-opposing, traditionally as well as in its make-up. Those who hold its reins are mainly motivated by the consideration of their own and industrial progress, and are thus totally oblivious of everything except their own selfish ends. The intellectual centres of this civilization—America, Europe and Russia—are overtly, but sometimes insidiously, at war with spirituality, unseen realities, religious ethics and Divine overlordship. The logical climax of this civilization with its attendant materialism and industrial progress does not appear to be far away its greatest champion and defender, named as Dajjāl in the prophetic language, shall make his debut.<sup>1</sup> He would necessarily be a God-

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1. The Traditions predicting the appearance of Dajjāl clearly indicate his distinguishing features and characteristics. Being too numerous and handed down through different sources, these Traditions specify that Dajjāl would make his debut at a time fixed aforehand (although the time has not been made known to us) from amongst the Jews. The detailed references to the person and characteristics of Dajjāl hardly allow its denial or interpretation of the prophecies as alluding to a seductive agency and not to a definite person. These Traditions also specify that Dajjāl will appear in Palestine where he would wield immense power and glory. It seems that Palestine would be the last stage where this uncanny

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opposing tyrant commanding all the resources of material and industrial progress, championing the cause of atheistic materialism, and seeking divine worship for the means of material prosperity as well as for those who possess these means. This would be the culminating point of this godless civilization which is being brewed in the crucible of Europe for the past few centuries.

### **Atheism, Dissension and Destruction**

In the foregoing paragraph the essential features of the present day materialistic-cum-industrial civilization, which is soon likely to reach its climax, have been sketched. Whenever that happens, its philosopher and guide shall be no one else except Dajjāl. But, merely the leadership of a materialistic civilization by someone does not offer sufficient ground to identify him with Dajjāl, the anti-God adversary of the last time who has been so bitterly condemned by the Prophet of Islam, and from whose appalling evils and calamities the believers have been asked to seek the refuge of God. These directives by the Prophet, to be sure, point out the acuteness of the impending danger.

Solomon once reigned supreme and so did Zul-Qurnain. The Qur'ān speaks of the immense material and political power

drama of struggle between faith and materialism will reach its final culmination. The markings of this sinister contest can even now be seen at work in this holy land. Facing the Jews, there is a nation whose greatest claim to power lies in its being custodian to the Divine Call to righteousness and the overlordship of the One and Only God, while, on the other, there are the people believing in the superiority of race and blood. These adversaries of the faith in God and equality of mankind are bent upon employing the entire human and material resources of the world for establishing the undisputed superiority of their own race. And, they also hold the key to the technological progress and the resources laid at their door by the latest discoveries of physical sciences. The sign of this final encounter, crucial for the humanity at large, and the Islamic East in particular, have already begun to hang out, awaiting, perhaps, for the appointed time when the impending drama would unfold itself with the leading character as already mentioned in the prophecies.

owned by them as well as the amazing speed and resources commanded by them. We have, therefore, to discern clearly the dividing line between them and Dajjāl, for this would form the barrier between a tyrannical despot and a virtuous ruler described thus by the Qur'ān : "How excellent a slave! Lo! he was ever turning in repentance (toward Allah)." <sup>1</sup>

Now, this dominant characteristic of the virtuous rulers, indicated in the Qur'ānic verse constitutes the line of demarcation between such a suzerain and a tyrant autocrat. Solomon and Zul-Qarnain as well as most of the righteous and right-guided rulers presiding over the Islamic state during the first few centuries of its inception manifested this essential trait which always fostered inspiration in them to direct their administrative skill, political sagacity, brilliant capabilities, sense of justice and love of humanity towards propagating the true faith. God has described their qualities thus :

"Those, who, if We give them power in the land, establish worship and pay the poor-due and enjoin kindness and forbid iniquity. And Allah's is the sequel of events." (*Al-Hajj* : 41)

At another place, says God :

"As for the Abode of the Hereafter We assign it unto those who seek not oppression in the earth, nor yet corruption. The sequel is for those who ward off (evil)." (*Al-Qasas* : 83)

On the contrary, the most visible characteristic of Dajjāl, his identifying mark indicated by the Prophet of Islam is atheism in its widest connotation. He said :

"KUFR (atheism) would be inscribed between his eyes. Every believer whether lettered or unlettered would be able to read that." <sup>2</sup>

The Traditions of the Prophet clearly specify that Dajjāl would be an enthusiastic and crafty preacher of atheism and that his efforts would be directed to burden the believers with disbelief and scepticism. In another tradition it has been stated that.

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1. *Sad* : 30

2. *Sahih bukhari*

"By God, a man would come to him taking him to be a believer, and would become his follower. Then he would fall into scepticism prompted by the latter." <sup>1</sup>

The fascinating but hideous enchantment of Dajjāl would then spread out and envelop every family, hearth and home; neither women nor children would be immune from his hypnotizing spell; nobody would be able to exercise the needful restraint over his dependents, wife and children; everyone would be a law unto himself and would also be proud of it. A Tradition of the Prophet relates :

"Dajjāl would sojourn in the barren lands of Marraqanāt where women would flock together to him, till the people would put their mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts into fetters lest they should also go over to him." <sup>2</sup>

The society would become so ethically barren and dissolute that :

"Only sinners and black sheep would at last remain who would be weightless like birds and emptyheaded like beasts; and they would be unable to distinguish between virtue and wickedness." <sup>3</sup>

This picturesque description of the modern materialistic and atheistic civilization depicts, in the prophetic phraseology, the climax of this sophisticated and luxurious yet disintegrating culture. It also brings into relief the distinguishing features and the conspicuous traits of the present-day society. This is, in truth and reality, one of those unfathomable miracles of the Prophet's teachings which shall ever continue to be a source of enlightenment and guidance to humanity. Who can deny the fact that the modern materialistic culture lacks depth and weight ? It has not only unburdened itself of the weight of gravest cares and responsibilities, but also learnt to fly in the sky like birds. Man has conquered both, the speed as well as the space, but failed to live like human beings; he can destroy blooming gardens and plentiful crops, massacre the

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1. *Abū Daūd*

2. *Tabrānī* on the authority of ibn 'Umar

3. *Sahīh Muslim*, on the authority of 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar and Ibn al-'Aas.

entire nations with insufferable cruelty and blot into extinction the whole countries without the least hesitation. History is unable to cite any other civilization combining similar cruelty, barbarity and inhumanity along with the abundance of goods and comforts. The Prophet of Islam alluded to the overflowing luxuries of the modern age in these words :

"They would then have their provisions showering on them and shall have plentiful means of comfort." <sup>1</sup>

### Fanciful Self-Satisfaction

We have explained how the concept of nature and society emanating from "this-worldly" attitude denies all other realities except the brief span of worldly life. It devotes its attention exclusively towards making this life more comfortable, prosperous, enchanting and delightful with complete disregard to social evils, moral morass and undescrivable cruelty generated in its process. Divine revelation, therefore, comes up to show the cloven hoof of the standard-bearers of materialism in the concluding verses of the Sūrat-ul-Khaf. The deeds and the personal bearings of these agents of death and destruction have been vividly delineated by the Qur'ān to spotlight their arful duplicity.

"And when it is said unto them :

Make not mischief in the earth, they say :

We are peace-makers only." (*Al-Baqarah* : 11)

This is a pointed allusion to the Jews who have completely forgotten the resurrection and hereafter despite long-drawn chastisement they have had to undergo for their duplicity and treacherous behaviour. No doubt they have played a leading role in the development of physical sciences, industry and technology, but their contribution towards fomenting revolt and strife, instability and anarchy has also been without a parallel. On the whole, their endeavours, talents and intellectual acumen have been directed more towards negative ends, plunging the world into a moral and social confusion with the sole objective of asserting the superiority of their

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1. *Sahih Muslim*, on the authority of 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar

own "chosen race" over all other nations of the world.

"Say : Shall We inform you who will be the greatest losers by their works ?

"Those whose effort goeth astray in the life of the world, and yet they reckon that they do good work.

"Those are they who disbelieve in the revelations of their Lord and in the meeting with Him. Therefore their words are vain, and on the Day of Resurrection We assign no weight to them."

(*Al-Kahf* : 104-6)

### **Limitation of Human Knowledge**

The Qur'ān protests against the materialistic view of epistemology which regards human intellect as infallible and capable of encompassing all sectors or phases of reality. This concept of knowledge asserts its capacity to discern the secrets of nature as well as mysteries of the vast heavenly bodies and planetary system, lands and oceans, beings and creatures and the designs and workings of supernatural forces. It tries to plumb directly the secrets of the creation of life and unlock the mysteries of past and future. The votaries of this view of human knowledge are arrogantly proud of it although the sum total of their knowledge is no more than a speck of dust. The tragedy, however, is that this very undue arrogance, over-confidence and excessive reliance on human knowledge coupled with the contemptuous defiance and outright denial of unseen realities has been the root-cause of man's vanity and self-conceit, narrow-mindedness and fanaticism. It is, indeed, this concept of human knowledge which is responsible for belief in the primacy of matter, its indestructibility and creativeness.

It is, again, this view of human knowledge, having its roots in the aberration of human nature, which has always induced man to claim the mastership over his fellow beings and to oppress those who do not agree to this concept. All of its salient features have been brought out by the parables told in the *Sūrat-ul-Kahf*, as, for instance, its spiteful enmity with those who are blessed with a true faith and the gnosis of God, like the Companions of the Cave; its love of earthly possessions and disrespect for the poor and lowly as

exhibited by the owner of two gardens: its denial of every thing not adequately comprehended by the limited human intellect as illustrated by the story of Khidhr and Moses. It is not unoften that the erring knowledge of man produces an entirely false impression. Zul-Qarnain thought that the sun was setting in the spring of murky water.

"Till when he reached the setting-place of the sun, he found it setting in a muddy spring." (*Al-Kahf*: 87)

Another example of a similar delusion is furnished in the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. <sup>1</sup> The latter mistook the smooth polished floor of Solomon's palace and tucked up her trousers to pass through it.

"It was said unto her : Enter the hall. And when she saw it she deemed it a pool and bared her legs. (Solomon) said : Lo ! it is a hall, made smooth, of glass." (*An-Namal* : 44)

The *Sūrat-Kahf* ends with the same note with which it begins. It has been emphasised in the concluding verses that the Divine knowledge is immensely wider and deeper in comparison to that of man, the Universe is much wider and greater than man can ever think of and the words <sup>2</sup> of the Lord-the words denoting His excellence, His attributes and His perfection-can never be fully set out in human language, however developed it might be. Signs and commandments of God are infinite and these cannot be expressed even if all the trees were made into pens and oceans <sup>3</sup> turned into ink.

"Say : Though the sea became ink for the Words of My Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my

1. The details of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba can be seen in the chapter *An-Namal* of Qur'ān.
2. Aalūsī has explained in *Rūh ul-Ma'ānī* that the "words" mean the power, glory and wisdom of the Lord. Whenever God wants to express His mysteries and wonders, He simply gives the command *Be* and the thing comes into being.
3. The astronomical observations of the expanding universe give an idea of the immense space, the distance between the earth and

(Continued on next page)

Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof to help." (*Al-Kahf*: 110)

Again, the *Sūrat-ul-Luqmān* says :

"And if all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to help it, (were ink), the Words of Allah could not be exhausted.

"Lo ! Allah is Mighty, Wise." (*Luqmān* : 27)

### **Prophethood : Its Nature and Necessity**

A question arises here. If the tremendous space and innumerable creations contained therein are beyond human imagination, if all the trees and seven seas are inadequate to expound the wisdom and glory of God and if the infinite signs and commandments of the Lord are beyond the ken of human understanding, then how can man attain the knowledge of His excellence and His attributes, how can the mystery of life be solved and how is man to seek the path of Divine guidance and righteousness? The prophets too are no more than mere mortals. We know that the knowledge of man is extremely limited and liable to commit mistakes. Then, how are we to place reliance on the teachings and wisdom of a prophet? The *Sūrah* reveals the answer to all these questions on behalf of the last Prophet of God.

"Say : I am only a mortal like you. My Lord inspireth in me that your God is only One God." (*Al-Kahf*: 111)

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the planets as well as between different planets, their numbers, the speed of light of heavenly bodies, their volumes and densities, the laws of gravity and the intricate interaction of physical laws sustaining the cosmos. Modern scientific discoveries also demonstrate how the rotation of earth, atmosphere of life-supporting gasses, the delicate proportion of life-giving elements and similar other phenomenal causes go to make this earth habitable and life-sustaining. Numerous other branches of science like biology, chemistry, zoology, botany and other physical sciences have revealed, thanks to well equipped laboratories and the toil of innumerable scientists, what could have never been conceived a few centuries ago. But all this knowledge is infinitesimally small as compared to the knowledge still beyond our reach.



This verse tells us that the only reliable source of God's gnosis, the means to fathom the mystery of mysteries, as also the mark of honour and excellence of the prophets is the revelation vouchsafed to them. Man can never aspire to attain enduring success without placing reliance in the prophetic inspiration. This was the quintessence and central truth of prophethood expounded by the Prophet of Islam when he said : "I am only a mortal like you. My Lord inspireth in me that your God is only one God."

### **The Last Word :**

The *Sūrah* concludes by drawing our attention again towards the Hereafter and its paramount importance for our worldly life. It calls upon us to always keep this fundamental truth in view and draw inspiration from it in all our actions and demeanour. The Surah thus concludes with the message it expounded in the opening verses.

"And whoever hopeth for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous work, and make none sharer of the worship due unto his Lord." (*Al-Kahf*: 111)

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